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*'DAS DENKEN DER LEHRE.*  
WALTER BENJAMIN,  
FRANZ JOSEPH MOLITOR  
AND THE JEWISH TRADITION'

by Bram Mertens, Lic. Phil.(Leuven), MPhil. (Keele)



Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a dialectical exploration of the importance of the Jewish tradition and theology in the work of Walter Benjamin, primarily through his reading of Franz Joseph Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, and secondarily through his close friendship with Gershom Scholem. It also argues that the influence of the Jewish tradition is a constant factor in Benjamin's work, transcending the conventional division between his 'metaphysical' *Frühwerk* and his 'Marxist' *Spätwerk*.

The first chapter presents a historical-philosophical overview of the form and content of the Jewish tradition, with particular emphasis on the seminal importance of language as the medium of tradition. The second chapter offers both an exhaustive philological investigation of Benjamin's contacts with Molitor's book, on the basis of new information gathered from both Benjamin's and Scholem's diaries and correspondence, as well as a selection and discussion of some of the most salient and relevant aspects of *Philosophie der Geschichte*. The third and final chapter assesses the impact of the foregoing as it culminates in the work of Walter Benjamin.

Firstly, it focuses on the early essays *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* and *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, drawing parallels between their conception of language as a medium and Jewish concepts of language and tradition as they are presented by Molitor and Scholem. Secondly, it turns to the *Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen* and to Benjamin's unfinished magnum opus, *Das Passagen-Werk*, to illustrate the continuity of his thoughts on language and tradition in the concept of *profane Erleuchtung*. After each chapter, a short interlude focuses on different forms of Judaism in Benjamin's work, notably the Jewish concept of commentary in the essays on Kafka, the concept of the understated apocalypse and the name of God.

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B.M. – Nottingham, 2001.

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I would very much like to thank Professor Roger Woods, who beared with me when I suggested that a quick glance at *Philosophie der Geschichte* might make my argument slightly more coherent, and without whose tenacity this would have been one subject short of a thesis.

Dr. Lieven De Cauter I thank for putting the idea into my head in the first place, and I would like to reiterate my gratitude to Dr. Rudi Laermans, who still remains, in many ways, the man without whom.

I take great pleasure in thanking Dr. Iain Ogilvie and Dr. Macdonald Daly for Scottish wisdom and Belgian beers – despite all the headaches, I still remember a great deal of what they taught me.

Over these past few years, my friends, in varying degrees of severity, have tolerated the most improper impositions from my part, and now this thesis is finished, I shall begin to work on some means of repaying them. In the mean time, suffice it here to say that I thank them most heartily: Messrs. Wim Maris, Jeroen Eggermont, Benjamin James Everitt, Jesús Manuel Alonso, Martyn Saville, and Mss. Alex Harrington, Jenny ‘the Slayer’ Palmer and Nel Rombaut.

*Het lijkt echter geen twijfel dat mijn voornaamste dank moet uitgaan naar degene die me door zowat elk uur van de laatste turbulente maanden van dit beest heeft geleid, degene aan wie dit werk altijd al een beetje opgedragen was, maar nooit zoveel als nu: mijn Ellie.*

*B.M. – Nottingham, 2001.*



*Es ist dem philosophischen Schrifttum eigen, mit jeder Wendung von neuem vor der Frage der Darstellung zu stehen. Zwar wird es in seiner abgeschlossenen Gestalt Lehre sein, solche Abgeschlossenheit ihm zu leihen aber liegt nicht in der Gewalt des bloßen Denkens.*

——— *W. Benjamin, Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels.*

*Eine Erklärung, wie sie einer Schrift in einer Vorrede nach der Gewohnheit vorausgeschickt wird – über den Zweck, den der Verfasser sich in ihr vorgesetzt, sowie über die Veranlassungen und das Verhältnis, worin er sie zu anderen früheren oder gleichzeitigen Behandlungen desselben Gegenstandes zu stehen glaubt –, scheint bei einer philosophischen Schrift nicht nur überflüssig, sondern um der Natur der Sache willen sogar unpassend und zweckwidrig zu sein. Denn wie und was von Philosophie in einer Vorrede zu sagen schicklich wäre – etwa eine historische Angabe der Tendenz und des Standpunkts, des allgemeinen Inhalts und der Resultate, eine Verbindung von hin und her sprechenden Behauptungen und Versicherungen über das Wahre –, kann nicht für die Art und Weise gelten, in der die philosophische Wahrheit darzustellen sei.*

——— *G.W.F. Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes.*

*Deux infinis. Milieu.*

*Quand on lit trop vite ou trop doucement, on n'entend rien.*

——— *B. Pascal, Pensées.*

*Scripta, qua fragmenta s[ive] non extantes, cogitationibus in statu nascendi similes sunt [...]. Quod in imaginibus, est in lingua.*

——— *Pyrrho Atticus, Rhetorica.*

*There is a life of tradition that does not merely consist of conservative preservation, the constant continuation of the spiritual and cultural possessions of a community. There is such a thing as a treasure hunt within tradition, which creates a living relationship to tradition and to which much of what is best in current Jewish consciousness is indebted, even when it was - and is - expressed outside of the framework of orthodoxy.*

——— *Gershom Scholem.*

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# Das Denken der Lehre

oder

Prolegomena zu einer künftigen  
More Nebuchim li-Benjamin

~~~~~

Walter Benjamin,  
Franz Joseph Molitor  
und die jüdische Tradition

~~~~~

verfaßt von

Bram Jozef Mertens

*Entworfen 1997,  
Verfaßt 2001,  
Damals wie heute  
Seinem Gedächtnis  
gewidmet.*

# PREFACE

This poem was written by Gershom Scholem in July 1918 on the occasion of Benjamin's 26<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>1</sup> From it speaks a maturity and a complexity of critical insight into Benjamin, both as a person and as a writer, the like of which would not often be seen again; one notable exception being Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, who opened the preface of the first edition of Benjamin's correspondence with the words: 'Walter Benjamins

Trauernder, nah mir und doch stets verborgen  
Nur die Berufung dich am Leben hält,  
Doch Schweigst du. Auf dein Schweigen ist die Welt  
Gebaut. Die Trauer ist der ewige Morgen,

In dem du stehst. Daß du noch nicht gestorben,  
das ist das Wunder, das mich überfällt.  
Du bist. Aus deiner tiefen Stille quellt  
Die Frage, die dich mir, mich dir geworben.

Du warst bei mir in all den schweren Tagen  
und bist doch fern bei dem, der dich besaß.  
Was mich bewegt, muß stumm ich in mir tragen.

Denn was an dir geschieht, hat solches Maß  
der Größe, daß die Worte, die ich finde,  
nicht rein genug sind. Drum ist Sprechen Sünde.

Person war von  
Anbeginn derart  
Medium des  
Werkes, sein  
Glück hatte er so  
sehr an seinem  
Geist, daß, was  
immer sonst  
Unmittelbarkeit

des Lebens heißt, gebrochen wurde.'<sup>2</sup> With nearly fifty years between them, the intuitions of Benjamin's two greatest interpreters are not a million miles away from each other. It is indeed remarkable how much Walter Benjamin's

<sup>1</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, edited by Karlfried Gründer und Friedrich Niewöhner, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995-2000), vol. 2, p. 297.

<sup>2</sup> 'Walter Benjamin's person was, from the very outset, so much the medium of his work, and his own happiness was so much on his mind that whatever is usually called the immediacy of life was broken.' (Theodor W. Adorno, 'Benjamin, der Briefschreiber', in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 583-590; p. 583).

persona seems to linger around the centre of any exploration of his work, how much he so obviously detested immediacy, which he seemingly felt to be both vulgar and impossible, how much he abhorred the use of the first person, and how much he loved the art of hiding, postponing, suggesting, deferring and suspending. As he wrote in *Zentralpark*: 'Das Labyrinth ist der richtige Weg für den, der noch immer früh genug am Ziel ankommt.'<sup>3</sup> One unavoidable, stubborn suspicion is that there is a pattern in Benjamin's work – 'Sein Kombinieren darf der Dichter nicht vertuschen'<sup>4</sup> – a network of correspondences based on its own logic, or logics, which will become apparent to anyone who is blessed with the patience to look for it. 'Auf [s]ein *Schweigen* ist die Welt gebaut', indeed. As the caesura, to Hölderlin, was the real locus of all meaning, there sometimes seems to be more in Benjamin's written silences than one might suspect; readers of Benjamin's correspondence become attentive and very curious indeed at the sound of one of those phrases of which he himself was so fond: 'Von meiner Arbeit wäre zur Zeit vielleicht mehr zu sagen denn je aber freilich desto weniger zu schreiben.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 'The labyrinth is the right way for the one who still arrives early enough at his destination.' (I, 668).

<sup>4</sup> 'The poet is not allowed to conceal the fact that he is putting together [...].' (Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols. and 3 suppl., edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser and others (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974-1999), I, 355. We will refer to Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* in the by now canonical way, with a Roman numeral referring to the volume and Arabic numerals referring to the pages.)

<sup>5</sup> 'There might perhaps more to say about my work at the moment than ever, but even less to write.' (Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 vols., edited by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995-2000), vol. I, p. 436 Hereafter, we will refer to these *Gesammelte Briefe* as *GB*). The very inventiveness of the grammatical complexity of this sentence typifies Benjamin's style, even in his correspondence, and makes it both a joy and a challenge to read – but slowly and studiously.

One such ‘silence’ in Benjamin’s work is the Jewish tradition, and the question as to the sources of his knowledge regarding this tradition. Commentators are only rarely loath to admit that there is more than just an element of the Jewish tradition concealed within the work of Walter Benjamin – even Adorno, of all people, felt compelled to write that ‘ein theologisches Modell, die Tradition der jüdischen, zumal mystischen Bibelauslegung [in seiner Methode] nicht zu verkennen [ist]’<sup>6</sup> – but for all these concessions, a serious study of the sources of Benjamin’s Judaism still remains to be written: the question of Benjamin’s Jewish *Q* has never really been asked. And yet it has already been answered, tentatively and implicitly, by Gershom Scholem. This very prolific author once found himself, next to Dora Benjamin, in the most privileged position to comment on Benjamin’s interest in and development into the Jewish tradition, namely at its very inception. Over the past five or six years, a large number of new documents have been published from the archives of both Benjamin and Scholem, including a new, six-volume edition of the former’s correspondence, replacing the old two-volume edition of 1966, a three-volume edition of Scholem’s correspondence as well as a two-volume edition of his diaries and short texts from the crucial years 1913-1923, and a translation of his last completed work, the autobiographical *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*. These new documents contain a wealth of new information, which in itself already demands a reassessment of certain aspects of Benjamin’s work, but in some cases, the voices they contain actually seem to

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<sup>6</sup> ‘a theological model, the tradition of Jewish, or rather mystical interpretation of the Bible is unmistakeable [in his method]’ (Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Einleitung zu Benjamins “Schriften”’, in *Noten zur Literatur*, pp. 567-582; p. 573).

ask us explicitly to look into the forgotten corners of the past. The most vocal, unsurprisingly, is Scholem. In an essay published in *Neue Rundschau* in 1965, he writes: ‘Als ich [Benjamin] 1916 erzählte, daß das sechzig bis achtzig Jahre vorher erschienene große vierbändige Werk des Baaderschülers Molitor über die Kabbala, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, überraschenderweise noch beim Verlag zu haben sei, gehörte es zu den ersten Werken über das Judentum, die er sich anschaffte, und behauptete viele Jahre einen Ehrenplatz in seiner Bibliothek.’<sup>7</sup>

The name Molitor seems to appear on a regular basis in Scholem’s writings and correspondence, either with reference to his own interests in Kabbalah studies – as he writes to Jürgen von Kempfki in April 1960: ‘Ich sammle prinzipiell alles, was über Kabbala geschrieben wurde. Die Auslassungen Molitors und seiner Verehrer sind da von nicht geringem Interesse.’<sup>8</sup> – or with reference to Benjamin’s albeit limited knowledge, at least in Scholem’s eyes (but then whose knowledge would not be in the eyes of the greatest Jewish scholar of the century?), of the Jewish tradition. The less response Scholem seemed to elicit with his references to Molitor – *Molitorschüler*, then and now, are few and far between, to say the least – the more insistent they seemed to become. In his book *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, he wrote: ‘Es ist

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<sup>7</sup> ‘When I told Benjamin in 1916 that *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, the great four-volume work on the Kabbalah by Molitor, one of Baader’s pupils, which had appeared sixty to eighty years earlier, was still available from the publisher, it was amongst the first works on Judaism which he acquired, and for many years it had an honorary place in his library.’ (Gershom Scholem, ‘Walter Benjamin’, in *Judaica* 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 193-227; p. 219).

<sup>8</sup> ‘As a matter of principle, I collect everything which has been written about the Kabbalah. The opinions of Molitor and his admirers are of a not inconsiderable interest in this matter.’ (Gershom Scholem, *Briefe*, 3 vols., edited by Itta Shedletzky (München: Beck, 1994-1999), vol. 2, pp. 54-55).



heute fast vergessen, daß Molitor der einzige ernst zu nehmende christliche Kenner der Kabbala im Zeitalter des deutschen Idealismus und wohl im ganzen 19. Jahrhundert war.’<sup>9</sup> Whether the question seemed too obvious to him, or whether his work both as an author and as a lecturer at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem forbade him to do so, Scholem never wrote a comprehensive account of the importance and the sources of the Jewish tradition in the work of Walter Benjamin. What he did instead, perhaps taking a cue from the master, was insinuate, hint, suggest and even point towards those places from which he suspected, or knew, that a fruitful investigation could take root. Reading Scholem’s correspondence, it is hard to rid oneself of the impression that he wanted someone to write a book about Benjamin, Molitor and the Jewish tradition. Here, almost twenty years after Scholem’s death, and more than sixty years after Benjamin’s, I offer my answer to his call. *Vielleicht wird diese Wahrheit uns doch nicht davonlaufen...*

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Today, it has almost been forgotten that Molitor was the only Christian expert on the Kabbalah in the age of German Idealism, and even in the whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who should be taken seriously.’ (Gershom Scholem, *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit: Studien zur Grundbegriffen der Kabbala* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 285).

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TRADITION

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**T**he work of Walter Benjamin, if we may be allowed this most precarious of phrases as the opening words of the first chapter, has been the subject of much controversy and debate, usually of the heated variety, between several groups seeking to claim him for their own cause. To some he is a Marxist who overcame his early delusions that theological speculations ever got anybody anywhere. To others, he is an untimely scholastic theologian who lapsed momentarily, towards the end of his life, into the belief that a passing fad like Marxism would save the world. To others still, he is the great prophetic predecessor of deconstruction, postmodernism or postromanticism, although those who share this particular conviction are quite often puzzled by the presence of apparently inexplicable snippets of Marxism and theology which seem to pop up unannounced throughout his work. Without wanting to say anything about the relative plausibility of any of these hypotheses, which is not the subject of this thesis, we do agree with the basic intuition that underlies them, namely the desire to interpret Benjamin's work in the context of a tradition. Benjamin's writings, some more obviously than others but all of them to a certain extent, do indeed seem constantly to tap into the most diverse strands of human intellectual history, whether these should be philosophical,

theological, literary or religious. According to Lieven De Cauter, Benjamin's texts inscribe themselves into the 'nameless tradition' of language mysticism which includes the Biblical narratives of the Fall and the Tower of Babel in Genesis, the Kabbalah and Early German Romanticism, as well as some less anonymous – but no less mysterious – figures such as Jakob Böhme, Franz von Baader, Johann Georg Hamann, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Franz Joseph Molitor.<sup>1</sup> These and other similar interpretations, ranging from the general to the very specific, are indubitably correct, insofar as they can account for certain aspects of Benjamin's work, certain recurring themes and topoi. Yet they fail to provide a full explanation of the style and appearance of the texts themselves, as, in this matter, it is paradoxically the vaguest diagnosis that carries the greatest power of expression.

Benjamin's writings are indeed inscribed into a tradition. They form part of the great, viscous and cloudy (Benjamin's word<sup>2</sup>) whole that is the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Lieven De Cauter, *De Dwerg in de Schaakautomaat: Benjamins Verborgen Leer* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1999), p. 52 ff. De Cauter's magnificent book is in many ways the trigger of this thesis: his basic hypothesis, which is nevertheless extremely complex yet very well-informed and subtle, is that Benjamin's philosophy has a system, and that this system is partly theological in its inspiration (and that part of this theology is Jewish). Our own thesis, with the restraints of time and length not imposed on a continental doctoral thesis, is rather more modest in its scope. We aim to demonstrate that certain concepts in Benjamin's work have a theological inspiration, which possibly or even probably came from his familiarity with Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte*, and that this influences his thought as well as the very style and strategy of his writing. If De Cauter's project is a macrological enterprise, ours aims to be, modestly, its micrological counterpart.

<sup>2</sup> The word *Wolke*, used as a noun, adjective or verb, tends to designate an ineffable and mysterious presence, as in the essay on Kafka, where Benjamin writes: 'Die Rätselfrage, die sich in [diese Geschichte] wölkt, ist Kafkas.' (II, 410), or about the parable 'Vor dem Gesetz': 'Der Leser, der ihr im "Landarzt" begegnete, stieß vielleicht auf die wolkige Stelle in ihrem Innern.' (II, 420), and

tradition, the pervasive and imposing *déjà-là* into which every Jew (and gentile) is born. Addressing the philological question of the exact sources of Benjamin's language mysticism, Lieven De Cauter states: '[...] the question of sources is not as important as it seems. Tradition is nameless, it is something which is passed on, something which one has received because it was there, somewhere. And if Benjamin uses this concept of tradition, his language essay may serve as a prime example of a text which inscribes itself into a tradition without names.'<sup>3</sup> This concept of tradition, as much as tradition itself, fundamentally informs Benjamin's texts. It shapes their form and appearance. To use one of his own terms from the essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache der Menschen*, tradition is the *medium*, the 'middle', in which his texts exist, consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally, inevitably. The link to Benjamin's essay on language is anything but arbitrary, as the Jewish tradition itself is most intimately intertwined with a certain way of thinking about language and the law which is revealed in it. This particular way of thinking can easily be

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again in the same essay: 'Etwas war immer nur im Gestus für Kafka faßbar. Und dieser Gestus, den er nicht verstand, bildet die wolkige Stelle der Parabeln.' (II, 427).

<sup>3</sup> 'We willen vooral benadrukken dat juist daarom de vraag naar zijn bronnen niet zo belangrijk is als ze lijkt. Traditie is naamloos, is iets wat wordt doorgegeven, wat men heeft gekregen omdat het er was, ergens. En als Benjamin dit begrip van traditie hanteert, dan is zijn taalopstel het toonbeeld van een tekst die zich in een traditie zonder namen plaatst.' (Lieven De Cauter, *De Dwerg in de Schaakautomaat*, p. 109n). Paraphrasing Valéry, Benjamin describes the namelessness of the sphere of tradition as follows: '"Die künstlerische Beobachtung, sagt er in der Betrachtung eines Künstlers, kann eine beinahe mystische Tiefe erreichen. Die Gegenstände, auf die sie fällt, verlieren ihren Namen [...]' (*Der Erzähler*, II, 463-464). We will discuss the link between tradition and storytelling in the second chapter.

described as baroque, involved and convoluted, and it will require more than the occasional detour in order to convey the very depths of this involvement, the many ways in which tradition folds back on itself, literally heaping meaning upon meaning. If our progress is therefore rather slower than would be desirable to even the most patient of readers, this is because the actual method of this tradition is the detour. There is a distinct sense in which the Jewish tradition abhors the directness of dogmatic instruction. Paraphrasing Benjamin, we might say that the Jewish tradition has ‘nichts zu sagen, nur zu zeigen.’ The Jewish tradition, in fact, shows so many correspondences and such great scope for intellectual *Spielerei* to the patient student, that it becomes nigh on impossible to follow a straight line, as the temptation to go anywhere but onwards becomes increasingly harder to resist. As any mathematician or linguist knows, the infinity of numbers and words is guaranteed by *and...* But of course we have to be selective, and we have at least to try and trace an argument, one amongst many others, we hasten to add. So, in this chapter we will try to distinguish the most important characteristics of this allegedly ‘Jewish’ mode of thought, in order to make clear the concept of ‘tradition’ so central to an understanding of Benjamin’s texts. The result will be a number of perspectival lines pointing to a single vanishing point, the all-pervasive absent presence of the divine.<sup>4</sup> It is this

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<sup>4</sup> It is quite meaningful that Benjamin hardly ever names or defines God, but rather appears to circle around the concept, circumscribing rather than describing. This, as we will have the occasion to discuss in general terms in this chapter and in greater detail in the final chapter, has everything to do with the theological nature of the concept. As we will see later, God is not the only theological concept in

presence which moulds and shapes tradition, and it is the presence of an absence around which tradition has moulded and shaped itself. The possibilities, impossibilities and paradoxes this has created will be revealed in these three chapters.

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Benjamin's work, which, at times, almost seems to slalom hazardously between unnameables and undefinables.

## I

In spite of the progressive secularisation taking place since the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, heralded by Baruch de Spinoza and inaugurated by Moses Mendelssohn, tradition remained and can still be considered a very real and almost tangible omnipresence in Jewish experience. In fact, to Mendelssohn, Haskalah and tradition did not appear as opposites at all, as he considered his own enterprise to be still very much part of tradition, although admittedly he was not unchallenged in that conviction. This deference to tradition, continuing up to this day, may be partly due to the fact that, predictably, a process that only started about three hundred years ago could not conceivably have succeeded in eradicating all traces of a tradition that goes back almost 3,000 years – or as tradition itself would have it, 5,760 years in the year 2000. It may also be because reactions to the perceived crisis of Judaism after the Middle Ages were very diverse. As the accumulative process of interpretation of the law yielded ever more expansive textual corpora of increasing dialectic and theological complexity, segments of the Jewish community, especially those in Eastern Europe and Russia, felt themselves more and more isolated from the perceived legalism of their rabbis. The programme of rationalisation announced by Spinoza and continued by a host of authors from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards rebelled against what they saw as a blind subservience to an increasingly obscure and outdated authority. An alternative reaction,

taking place around the same time, was the return to a personal, intimate and anti-intellectualist experience of the faith propagated by Hasidism and its founding father Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov.<sup>5</sup> Both Haskalah and Hasidism represent a movement away from the orthodoxy of their day, albeit in opposite directions, and the dynamics behind these movements continued to underlie subsequent developments in Judaism, from atheism, assimilation, liberalism and a sweeping secularisation to the Reform movement on the one hand and from the conservative and reconstructionist movement to orthodoxy, Zionism, Hasidism and fundamentalism on the other hand. Of course, not every modern Jewish movement allows itself to be subsumed quite as rigidly under one of these categories, and this tends to be even less the case with individual thinkers or authors. Individual confrontations with tradition tend to yield idiosyncratic responses and creative reinterpretations, merging elements from both mystical and rationalist traditions. One such reinterpretation, or series of reinterpretations, is the movement that became known as the 'Christian Kabbalah', which originated in Germany towards the end of the fifteenth century and whose influence extended into the middle of the nineteenth century. Authors associated with the Christian Kabbalah include Johannes Reuchlin, Paracelsus, Jakob Böhme, Franz von Baader and his pupil Franz Joseph Molitor, whose *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* (1827-1851) will be the subject of the

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<sup>5</sup> On the subject of Hasidism as an anti-intellectualist, personal movement, see Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), notably chapter 9, 'Der Chassidismus in Polen, die letzte Phase der jüdischen Mystik', pp. 356-385.



next chapter. The Christian Kabbalists, whose influence extended to the early German Romantics, are a good example of the somewhat contrived nature of the above distinction between rationality and mysticism. However, as a basic framework the above outline may suffice. That it at least in part corresponded to the experience of European Jews at the turn of the century is in fact corroborated by a statement by Benjamin himself, describing the experience of growing up in a liberal environment:

Ich bin, wie ich Ihnen kaum zu sagen brauche, liberal erzogen worden. Mein entscheidendes geistiges Erlebnis hatte ich, bevor jemals das Judentum mir wichtig oder problematisch geworden war. Was ich von ihm kannte war wirklich nur der Antisemitismus und eine unbestimmte Pietät. Als Religion war es fern, als Nationales unbekannt.<sup>6</sup>

This statement is very eloquent about the average assimilated Jew's experience, but also about the fact that, as it did for Benjamin, Judaism often

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<sup>6</sup> 'I was, as I need hardly tell you, raised in a liberal way. I had my decisive spiritual experience before Judaism had become either an issue or a problem to me. What I knew of it was really only antisemitism and a vague piety. As a religion it was remote, as a nationality it was unknown to me.' (letter to Ludwig Strauß of 10 October 1912, *GB I*, 69-70). This passage is sometimes quoted to downplay the importance of Benjamin's Judaism for his work, but rarely in conjunction with another passage from the same letter, where Benjamin writes: 'Von Wickersdorf aus, nicht spekulativ, nicht schlechthin gefühlsmäßig, sondern aus äußerer und innerer Erfahrung habe ich mein Judentum gefunden. Ich habe das was mir in Ideen und Menschen das höchste war, als jüdisch entdeckt. – Und um all das was ich erkannte auf eine Formel zu bringen [:] Ich bin Jude und wenn ich als bewußter Mensch lebe, lebe ich als bewußter Jude.' (*GB*, 71).

‘resurfaced’, as if it had maintained a dormant but pervasive presence all the time. Benjamin seemed to have believed this quite firmly himself, as he said to Scholem in August 1916: ‘Wenn ich einmal meine Philosophie haben werde, so wird es irgendwie eine Philosophie des Judentums sein.’<sup>7</sup> In fact, the image of immersion and emergence already reveals a crucial element of the perception as well as the putative nature of the Jewish tradition, but we must not allow ourselves to rush the argument.

Clearly, this historical background alone cannot explain the pervasiveness of tradition in Judaism today. If anything, it makes the fact that tradition is still very much alive today even more mysterious, although it does illustrate what was at stake in the conflicts between tradition, the cultic practice of religion and the Enlightenment. Not dissimilar from its gentile variant, the Jewish Enlightenment disputed the authority of a tradition it saw as opaque and unintelligible, but, and this is Benjamin’s position in the early essay *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, the Enlightenment failed to provide an adequate alternative to this authority, as it failed fully to understand its nature. So if we want to explain the elusive omnipresence of tradition, we need to turn to its most fundamental structures and characteristics. In fact, in the previous sentence, we have already touched upon the most fundamental characteristic of tradition, namely its omnipresence. Tradition in Judaism is itself divine, it is

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<sup>7</sup> ‘When I will have my philosophy at some point, it will somehow be a philosophy of Judaism.’ (Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, edited by Karlfried Gründer, Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink and Friedrich

the Aristotelian first ground of Judaism as a religion, of the Jews as a people, of either as a phenomenon, even.<sup>8</sup> The people of Israel, the Jews, were elected by God and entered into a *brit*, a covenant, with him, a covenant which was tested and renewed several times, by Abraham and Moses, but which is ultimately sealed by Israel's promise to keep to God's law. The offer, the promise, the law itself as well as its transgressions and reaffirmations are all recorded in the Torah, or the Pentateuch. Or rather, they all *are* Torah. The history of the very term *torah*, meaning instruction, teaching or guidance, is fairly complex, and in trying to unravel this complexity, we will perform a movement of thought – a *Gedankenbewegung*, as Benjamin calls it<sup>9</sup> – which will be repeated many times throughout our argument. This movement can be best characterized as an unfolding and refolding, a development and 'envelopment', so to speak, of meaning upon meaning. It is a strategy of subtle and accumulative (yet paradoxically never exhaustive) overdetermination that typifies the Jewish tradition and the interpretative processes that underlie it. It is the same

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Niewohner, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1995-2000), vol. 1, p. 391).

<sup>8</sup> It should be emphasised here, as will become abundantly clear later, that the concept of tradition we are discussing is largely limited to the law and its satellites, or *Halakhah* and *Aggadah*, and that it excludes, as such, the notion of 'custom' or *Minhag*, which is considered to be neither universally binding nor divine. Next to a whole host of eclectic customs, the *minhagim* also include the various and diverse liturgical rites in Jewish communities across the world, which will also be of little relevance to our argument. Nevertheless, it is impossible to maintain a rigid separation between the spheres of law and custom, just as it is impossible to extricate *Halakhah* and *Aggadah*, as their precise status can be rather blurred at the edges. See Joseph Tabory, 'Minhag', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, pp. 465-466 and 'The Jewish Liturgy' in Oesterley and Box,

strategy, with a thoroughly different stake, which underlies Benjamin's writing and writings.<sup>10</sup>

Originally, the term *torah* was used to designate individual instructions or laws, in the singular form *torah* or plural *torot*, next to a variety of similar terms. Only later, presumably during the Second Temple period, did it come to mean the Law or Teaching of Moses, and it is mentioned as such in one of the last verses of the Torah itself, *Malachi* 3:22, "Remember the Torah of Moses my servant". From the singular *torah*, Torah came to mean not only the precepts of the Law which God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai, and which are listed throughout Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, but also the genesis of the covenant – and of course the Genesis of the world that necessitated this covenant and its implementation in the Exodus – and the

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*A Short Survey of the Literature of Rabbinical and Medieval Judaism* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920), pp. 141-206.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance *GB* I, 445-446.

<sup>10</sup> The difference between Benjamin's preoccupations and those of the Jewish tradition presents an arguable case, but we have refrained from introducing yet another qualifying sub-clause into this sentence so as not to discourage the reader. Benjamin's method may be described as 'theological nihilism', as he writes in the so-called *Theologisch-politisches Fragment*: 'Diese [ewige und totale Vergängnis der Natur] zu erstreben, auch für diejenige Stufen des Menschen welche Natur sind, ist die Aufgabe der Weltpolitik, deren Methode Nihilismus zu heißen hat.' (II, 204). This would indeed appear to be quite different from (the abstraction of) the classical redemptive notion of Judaism, but it should not be forgotten that there is a distinct and stubborn antinomian and apocalyptic strain in Judaism which, as Scholem pointed out, can by no means be disarmed as a marginal phenomenon. The importance and function of this tendency in both Judaism and Benjamin will be discussed in a subsequent paragraph. Also, a brief caveat is in order here. Modern literary theory has performed its own mystification of rabbinic hermeneutics and specifically midrash, imposing on it all its own values of indeterminacy and polysemic interpretation, for instance in the work of Susan Handelman, José Faur and Geoffrey Hartman. In reaction to this, scholars in Jewish and Rabbinic studies such as David Stern, Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green have tipped the balance back, so to speak, by pointing out a number of

history of the people of Israel up to the end of the Babylonian exile (late fifth century BCE).<sup>11</sup> So strictly speaking, the term Torah refers only to the first five books of the Bible, which, as tradition has it, were dictated by God to Moses, including the accounts of the latter's birth and death.<sup>12</sup> As the term is later used to designate 'Scripture' as such, the other books of the Hebrew Bible, collected in *Nevi'im* (Prophets) and *Ketubim* (Writings) are also included in the 'Torah', although a more correct name for the Hebrew Bible is *Tanakh*, an acrostic formed from the first letters of Torah, *Nevi'im* and *Ketubim*.<sup>13</sup> This entire collection of texts is considered divine, or at least

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major differences between modern theoretical preoccupations and rabbinic methods of reading. This controversy will be discussed *in extenso* below.

<sup>11</sup> Even though most scholars in Jewish studies have always used the Latinised Greek names of the first five books of the Torah rather than their original Hebrew names, the latter do have a certain poetic quality which is hardly conveyed in their translations. So merely for the sake of poetry, the Hebrew names are *Bereshith*, *Shemot*, *Devarim*, *Ba-Midbar* and *Va-Yiqra*.

<sup>12</sup> Baruch J. Schwartz, 'Torah', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, pp. 696-698.

<sup>13</sup> Franz Joseph Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, which will be the subject of the next chapter, contains most of the information which we will discuss in this chapter, which means that, from May 1917 at least, Benjamin *could* have known it. Obviously, it would be both time-consuming and tedious to cover every single subject again, from the perspective of Molitor, in the next chapter. This is why we will occasionally provide, in the footnotes, quotations from or locations in *Philosophie der Geschichte* where the relevant information can be found. A discussion of the content of the *Torah*, for instance, can be found in book one, where Molitor writes: 'Die kanonischen Schriften der Juden bestehen aus vier und zwanzig Büchern, nämlich: fünf Büchern der Thorah, oder (Ch'mischah Chum'schee Thorah d.h. fünf Fünftheil der Thorah genannt); acht Büchern der Propheten, נביאים (N'biim); eilf Büchern verschiedener anderer heiligen Schriften, כתובים (Ch'thubim). Der Inbegriff der gesammten heiligen Schriften wird תנך (Th(e)n(a)ch) genannt, welches Wort bloß eine Abkürzung der drei Wörter Th-orah, N-'biim, Ch'thubim ist.' (Franz Joseph Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition in dem alten Bunde und ihre Beziehung zur Kirche des Neuen Bundes. Mit vorzüglicher Rücksicht auf die Kabbalah*, first edition, 4 vols. (Frankfurt am Main/Münster: Hermann/Theissing, 1827-1853), vol. 1, p. 11. Hereafter, we will refer to this book with the italic capital *M*, a roman numeral for the volume and Arabic numerals for the page). See also Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission*

divinely inspired, in the case of *Nevi'im* and *Ketubim*. In spite of the fact that they are blatantly the work of several generations of editors and that they actually include a whole variety of genres, tradition considers the Torah as a whole to be the word of God. This topos is what David Stern calls the 'rabbinic ideology of the canonical Torah – Pentateuch, Prophets and Writings – as the inspired word of God, a timeless unity'.<sup>14</sup> Or as James Kugel formulated it so poignantly: 'For still later ages [i.e. the Second Temple period], all Torah came "from Sinai," and that one primal divine revelation came to infuse all Jewish belief and practice: *Torah is the entire fabric of Judaism*.'<sup>15</sup> Torah indeed comes to infuse, define and flesh out Judaism, and as we will see later, the choice of the word 'fabric' is not at all arbitrary, as the Torah becomes the basic texture upon which the entire Jewish tradition is woven. The Torah represents the dual covenant that defines the Jews as a people, it contains the Law Israel has undertaken to obey, it tells the story of God delivering his elected people from bondage,

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in *Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, translated by Eric J. Sharpe (Uppsala: Gleerup, 1961), pp. 20 ff.

<sup>14</sup> David Stern, 'Midrash and the Language of Exegesis: A Study of Vayikra Rabbah, Chapter 1', in *Midrash and Literature*, edited by Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 105-124; p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> James L. Kugel, 'Torah', in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 995-1005, p. 1000 (our emphasis). As William Scott Green points out in his thoughtful essay 'Romancing the Tome', and as we will come to discuss in a subsequent paragraph on Midrash, this perceived sanctity and exclusivity of Torah as the central pillar of Judaism is very much a retrogressive construct of the emergent rabbis, who, after the destruction of the Temple and the priestly caste, took it upon them to provide Judaism with a new central focus ('Romancing the Tome: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and the Theory of Literature', in *Semeia 40: Text and Textuality*, edited by Charles E. Winquist (Decatur, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 147-168). As we will see later, the choice of the word 'fabric' to describe the relationship between Judaism and the Text seems far from arbitrary,

leading them to the promised land, and it tells of the second exile, of despair, but also of a renewed promise and a continuing (if not unproblematic) trust in the Lord. Specifically from Rabbinic times onwards, the Jews come to owe their genesis, their existence and their history to Torah, and in that sense they truly became the People of the Book.

The fact that the canon of this book included superfluous repetitions, discontinuities, stylistic and theological variations, and even contradictions does not detract from the Torah's eloquence or authority. The Torah, after all, was the word of God, written in a divine language, and could therefore not possibly be read or treated in the same way as human language. In Schwartz's words, the language of the Torah was deemed 'omnisignificant,'<sup>16</sup> the divine revelation of the Torah was contained in all its aspects, and required careful and mindful interpretation.<sup>17</sup> David Stern goes even further in his description of the divinity of the Torah, stating that it is 'a trope for God [...] in a metonymic fashion, whereby the Torah's being is treated as a kind of figurative extension of God's: just as he is timeless, so the Torah is beyond all temporality; just as all his deeds are

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as the word is also designates the tractates, or *massekhtot* of the *Mishnah*, the oral tradition which is woven onto and into the Torah (see note 33 below).

<sup>16</sup> Baruch J. Schwartz, 'Torah', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, pp. 696-698; p. 697.

<sup>17</sup> Franz Joseph Molitor puts the same principle as follows: 'Denn die heilige Schrift, als das große Mysterium der Offenbarung Gottes, in welchem Alles in Allem enthalten, ist ein Hieroglyph von unendlichen Hieroglyphen, eine ewige Quelle von Geheimnissen, die nie zu erschöpfen, die unaufhörlich neu und herrlich quillt.' (MI, 49).

meaningful, so every word in the Torah is full of significance.’<sup>18</sup> It is indeed very hard to overestimate the reverence Jews had and continue to have for the Torah, and any discussion of the Jewish tradition must bear in mind this all-infusing sense of the divine that emanates from this notion. The very fact that the language of the Torah, and by extension the Hebrew language as such (and by a yet further extension, language as such), was considered divine of course has far-reaching consequences. It is indeed remarkable that whenever central issues of Judaism are addressed, whether they are the nature of God, theology, ethics or art, to name but a few, the question of language is always at hand. It is thus as good as inevitable that we will come to cover the same ground over and over again, only approaching it from different angles as we go along. One phenomenon that appears to unite all those topics, however, is study. One of the commandments contained in the Law in fact states that it is the duty of every Jew to study and interpret the Torah. This commandment of *Talmud Torah* is repeated several times, but it first appears in Deuteronomy 6:6-7, a very important place in the Bible, as it immediately follows the *Shema*, the basic theological statement of Judaism. This ‘Jewish confession of faith’, as Peter Knobel termed it,<sup>19</sup> can be seen as a confirmation and a reiteration of the covenantal promise, and it was to be recited at least twice a day by every Jew (an obligation known as *qeri’at Shema*, in its turn derived from the verses coming after it). The fact that

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<sup>18</sup> David Stern, ‘Midrash’, in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 613-620, p. 619.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Knobel, ‘Shema’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, pp. 630-631; p. 630.



these few verses already yield two obligations and simultaneously serve as reciprocal proof for each other actually goes some way in indicating how the 'omnisignificant' word of God is interpreted. The passage in full goes: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away.' (*Dt.* 6:4-7; also *Dt.* 11:13-21 and *Nm.* 15:37-41).<sup>20</sup>

The obligation of *Talmud Torah*, stating that the Torah had to be interpreted and completed, in its turn made study a divine activity, and the results of these interpretations were in their turn considered to partake of this divinity. The rationale behind this was that because the Torah already contained everything, there was nothing man could read into it that was not already there in the first place.<sup>21</sup> Or as one saying from the Mishnah-tractate *Avot* has it: 'Turn it over and turn it over for all is in it.' (*M. Avot*, V, 22).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See also chapter three, note 94.

<sup>21</sup> Molitor discusses this principle quite eloquently: 'In der ganzen Darstellungsweise der Bibel findet sich nichts Zufälliges, sondern alles hat tiefe Bedeutung, selbst das Geringfügigste, namentlich jede scheinbar nicht zur Sache gehörige Episode, jede Erzählung von scheinbar kleinlichen unbedeutenden Neben-Umständen, jede Wiederholung von Dingen und Reden, jeder Pleonasmus in Worten, ja sogar in den Partikeln bis auf den Bindepartikel, alles ist durchaus bedeutungsvoll. Es ist daher auch gar nicht einerlei, ob dieses oder jenes Synonym, dieser oder jener göttliche name gewählt wird, sondern jegliches Wort, jeglicher göttliche Name, hat an der Stelle, wo er gebraucht wird, stets seinen besonderen eigenthümlichen Grund.' (*M I*, 49-50). We will come to elaborate the technicalities of what Molitor describes here later in this chapter.

<sup>22</sup> (Translation modified). All quotations from the Talmud (and Mishnah) are taken from the Soncino edition (*The Babylonian Talmud: Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices*, edited by Isidore Epstein, 35 vols. (London: Soncino Press, 1935-1952)). The name of the individual tractate will be preceded by 'B.', for *Bavli*, and followed by Roman numerals and a letter *a* or *b* to indicate the

At the same time, however, great emphasis is placed on man's responsibility in uncovering those multiple meanings of the Torah through relentless study, as we will come to discuss extensively further on in our argument.<sup>23</sup> It is after all of little use to be reassured of the presence of hidden meanings when you are not obliged to look for them. In a way, this is a fascinating pre-emptive inversion of Nietzsche's as yet unmade remark that there is little to praise in a search for something you have hidden yourself.<sup>24</sup> Again it brings us back to a rival concept of meaning and, inevitably, language. Suffice it to say at this point that a perspective which intimately links meaning to the very physicality of language, to the point of investing meaning in the ornamental crowns on individual letters, will differ from a perspective that perceives language as a(n arbitrary) carrier of a meaning which is in some way extrinsic to it.<sup>25</sup> The commandment of *Talmud Torah*, however, meant yet another extension of Torah, this time into the dual

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number and side of the folio, a method which has been in practice since the first ever printed edition of the Talmud, the so-called Bomberg edition of 1520-1523. This particular saying represents a fundamental topos, central to the (rabbinic) Jewish tradition, and repeated many times in many ways, which is as close as the rabbinic Judaism ever gets to stating dogmata (cfr. Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, p. 19 ff.).

<sup>23</sup> As Harvey Goldberg writes: 'As new meanings of text and rituals are discovered, through continuous interpretation, the attitude is maintained that one is simply uncovering further depths which always had been implicit in the divinely revealed or inspired writings.' ('Epilogue: Text in Jewish Society and the Challenge of Comparison', in *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without*, edited by Harvey E. Goldberg (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 315-329, pp. 319-320).

<sup>24</sup> 'Wenn Jemand ein Ding hinter einem Busche versteckt, es eben dort wieder sucht und auch findet, so ist an diesem Suchen und Finden nicht viel zu rühmen.' (Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Über Wahrheit und Lüge im Aussermoralischen Sinne', in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (München: DTV, 1988), vol. I, p. 883).

<sup>25</sup> B. *Menahot*, 29b. Cfr. *infra*.

concept of *torah she-bi-khetav*, or written law, and *torah she-be-'al-peh*, or oral law, both considered equally divine.<sup>26</sup> The books of the Torah, or the written law, had become a fairly stable corpus of texts by the end of the second century CE, determined by Yochanan ben Zakkai's legendary 'synod' at Yabneh, but the composition of the oral law was an entirely different matter. In fact, the compilation of the oral law has always been an ongoing process, which continues up to this day. Again, as was largely the case with the idiosyncratic sanctity of Torah, the oral law as such was a rabbinic construct, designed to institute rabbinic activity as the central focus of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent disappearance of the priestly cult.<sup>27</sup> As the whole of Torah, the written law, was meant to come from Sinai, so the whole of the oral law was said to have been revealed to Moses, even though there was sometimes no explicit mention of them in Scripture. In the Talmud, this belief was expressed in the

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<sup>26</sup> In book one of *Philosophie der Geschichte*, Molitor summarises this as follows: 'Deshalb wird dieses allgemeine Gesetz, nebst dem Buche der Schöpfung, שבכח תורה (Thorah Schebich'thab, die geschriebene Lehre) genannt, im Gegensatz von jener Anweisung, welche Moscheh noch besonders als Aufschluß und Auslegung über den Inhalt des Gesetzes von Gott empfangen, welche תורה שבעלפה (Thorah Scheb'al Peh, die mündliche Lehre) heißt.' (MI, 16).

<sup>27</sup> In the light of our hypothesis, it is interesting to note that the rabbinic tradition, which made an indelible mark on Judaism, originally sought to replace a cult very much bound to a particular place by one that could survive a permanent disjunction. After the destruction of the Temple and the Holiest of Holies as the dwelling place of God, the text appears to have shifted into focus as the locus of the divine, with the ineffable Name of God as the immediate analogy to the aforementioned Holiest of Holies. (For Molitor's explanation of this concept, see note 51 below). This may in part explain the tendency in Judaism to conceive of the text and of tradition itself as a physical space, exemplified, for instance, in the kabbalist notion of words as containers of wisdom or divinity. This notion is thoroughly different from one that sees words as signs or representations of a meaning that can be seen as external to them, and it is with this notion in mind that

formula *Halakhah Le-Mosheh Mi-Sinai*, meaning ‘a law to Moses from Sinai’. The first paragraph of the Mishnah-tractate *Avot* states this lineage in as many words: ‘Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the men of the Great Synagogue.’ (M. *Avot*, I, 1). At face value, or from the slightly inappropriate perspective of historicism, the concept of oral law is of course a retrospective rabbinic construct, as is the Hebrew Bible for that matter, designed to clothe rabbinism in the same aura of ancient authority as the priestly tradition.<sup>28</sup> As such we can say, with Scholem, that ‘die Tradition [ist] als ein besonderer Aspekt der Offenbarung historisch ein Produkt des Prozesses, in dem sich das rabbinische Judentum zwischen dem vierten oder dritten vorchristlichen Jahrhundert und dem zweiten nachchristlichen Jahrhundert gebildet hat,’<sup>29</sup> which may in its turn serve to justify our very limited selection of material to characterize the Jewish tradition as a whole.

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Benjamin’s writings on language allow themselves to be read in a rather less perplexing light than they have usually been.

<sup>28</sup> This is not to say, however, that the rabbinic tradition emerged out of the blue around 70 CE. Interpretation of the Torah in fact takes place in the Bible itself, notably in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (the era that saw the onset of the composition of the *Masorah*), and although the oral law ostensibly did not originate at the same time as the written law, there is sufficient evidence that its generation had already been going on for several centuries when it first came to be compiled. On this matter, see for instance David Instone Brewer, *Techniques and Assumptions in Jewish Exegesis before 70 CE* (Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> ‘[...] historically, tradition as a particular aspect of revelation is a product of the process that resulted in the development of rabbinic Judaism between the fourth or the third century BCE and the second century CE.’ (Gershom Scholem, ‘Offenbarung und Tradition als religiöse Kategorien im Judentum’, in *Über einige Begriffe des Judentums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 92). Scholem also distinguishes between the historical and the religious approach of tradition, without, however, coming down on either side of the argument.

Once every couple of centuries, a massive redaction of the state of the debate yielded another compilation of *torah she-be-'al-peh*, starting with the *Mishnah*, which was compiled around 200 CE. The *Mishnah* was compiled during the earliest rabbinic era by the *Tannaim*, literally meaning the 'repeaters', and it forms the basis for the entire further development of the Jewish tradition. During the same period, a similar work was composed, the *Tosefta* (Aramaic for 'additions'), which has some material that was not included in the *Mishnah*, but also shows considerable overlap with it. The exact relationship of *Mishnah* and *Tosefta* is thus not always clear.<sup>30</sup> After its final redaction, *Mishnaic* law became the subject of discussion and debate in the era of the *Amoraim*, which is Aramaic for 'discussers'. Whereas the author of the *Mishnah* had sought to produce a concise code of law, their aim was fundamentally different: the *Amoraim* attempted to reconstruct the argument that lead to the formulation of particular *mishnayyot* and provided extensive discussion of the *mishnayyot* even if they were in themselves perfectly clear. By preferring the often tortuous path of interpretation, study and discussion to the straightforward statement

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<sup>30</sup> The genealogy of the Jewish tradition is quite a complex and involved affair, and we must necessarily gloss over many details lest we lose the line of our argument in the laterality of crucial incidentals (a paradox which, as will become apparent later, is again a central characteristic of the hypothetical construct of the ideology of Jewish thought). For a very thorough scholarly treatment of the documents of the Jewish tradition, we can refer the reader to Günter Stemberger's *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, second edition, translated and edited by Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996). A more general introduction, putting the various stages of tradition in their historical context, can be found in Phillip Sigal's *Judaism: The Evolution of a Faith*, edited by Lillian Sigal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). A very good introduction to the basic texts of the Jewish

of the law, the Amoraim essentially started a trend that would come to make an indelible mark on the Jewish tradition. As the Mishnaic discussions of the Amoraim in their turn became part of the oral law, the following centuries saw the creation and compilation of extensive supplements to the Mishnah, known as *Gemara*, which is Aramaic for ‘completion’ or ‘study’. The Hebrew term for these *Gemara* is *Talmud*, and the compilation of these supplements resulted in the eponymous Palestinian Talmud or *Yerushalmi*, compiled during the first half of the fifth century CE, and the Babylonian Talmud or *Bavli*, which was regarded as a closed work around 700 CE.

In the end, only the Babylonian Talmud was considered authoritative, and up to this day, it is the fundament of all modern forms of the Jewish religion. Its afterlife is again a matter of some complexity: whereas there was certainly no question of revising or tampering with the tannaitic or amoraic writings, they continued to be the subject of discussion and commentary, and true to the ‘accumulative tendency’ of the Jewish tradition, the most important of these commentaries were added in the margins of the Talmud. Since the first printed editions of the Talmud started to appear in the 15th century, the commentaries of Rashi, the acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki (1040-1105), the ‘master of Jewish commentators’ responsible for commentaries on nearly all of the Bible as well as nearly all

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tradition is *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, edited by Barry W. Holtz (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

of the Talmud, have appeared right next to the central text.<sup>31</sup> During this first post-Talmudic era, the time of the *Rishonim* or 'First Ones', running from the tenth to the fifteenth century approximately, amplifications and discussions of Rashi's *Konteros*, as the commentary was known, in their turn produced the *Tosafot*, which is Hebrew for 'supplements'. These *Tosafot*, which continue to be printed on the outside columns of the Talmud pages, soon developed into a vast network of interconnecting questions, often referring to a completely different subject matter from that discussed on those pages. The *Tosafot* are what gave the Jewish tradition its aura of impenetrability and legalism, as they aim for complexity and dialectic sophistication. This is where they differ from the *Konteros*, which is almost a word-for-word commentary on the Talmud, whereas the *Tosafot* sought to embrace the larger conceptual and legal network. Beyond all that, as Robert Goldenberg writes, 'numerous voices enter the discussion: cross-references to other Talmudic sources, a key to quotations from the Bible and another to the great codes of Jewish law, additional briefer commentaries from medieval and even recent centuries.'<sup>32</sup>

The Mishnah is divided into six orders, or *Sedarim*, each encompassing a variable number of separate tractates or *Massekhtot*, a structure which is

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Goldenberg, 'Talmud', in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, edited by Barry W. Holtz (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 129-175; p. 139.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Goldenberg, 'Talmud', in *Back to The Sources*, p. 142. This essay also includes a sample page of the Babylonian Talmud, which gives a clear indication of the sheer condensed complexity of the text(s).

mirrored by the Talmud.<sup>33</sup> Literally, *Massekhtah* means 'webbing' or 'fabric', analogous, in fact, to the Latin *textus*, and the Jewish tradition can be considered as a continuous weaving and interweaving of these webbings, culminating in the creation of a hypercomplex whole with the addition of the *Tosafot*. Thus, as we said before, the choice of the word 'fabric' to describe the Jewish tradition is not at all arbitrary. On the contrary, it is how the Jewish tradition itself defines and understands its own form and appearance. This is highly relevant in our present context, as Walter Benjamin frequently uses metaphors of threading and weaving to describe the pleasure of the text, of reading, looking and finding. He seemed to have been particularly fond of texts and arguments that proceeded almost excruciatingly slowly, with meticulous attention to the minutest detail and with great dialectical or perhaps preferably scholastic subtlety. The joy found in the actual unfolding of the argument, or 'jener [...] rhythmischen Seligkeit, die da im Abspulen eines Knäuels besteht', as he himself put it, almost took precedence over the conclusion it eventually reached.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Molitor describes this as follows: 'Die *Mischmah* bestehet aus sechs סדרים Sedarim (Ordnungen), die in sechzig Auseinander-setzungen oder Traktaten מסכתות [sic] M'sachthoth zerfallen, wovon jede wieder in einzelne Perakim oder Abschnitte eingetheilt ist. Um den Leser einigermaßen mit dem Inhalt der *Mischmah* bekannt zu machen, wollen wir eine kurze Uebersicht geben.' (MI, 30). Molitor then proceeds to enumerate the six Sedarim and the sixty Massekhtot of the Mishnah (MI, 31-33).

<sup>34</sup> The passage from which this quotation is lifted, from *Haschisch in Marseille*, develops the idea of the thread of Ariadne, helping Theseus through the labyrinth, and compares the joy of prose to the joy of intoxication: 'Man müßte, um den Rätseln des Rauschglücks näher zu kommen, über den Ariadne-Faden nachdenken. Welche Lust in dem bloßen Akt, einen Knäuel abzurollen. Und diese Lust ganz tief verwandt mit der Rauschlust wie mit der Schaffenslust. Wir gehen vorwärts; wir entdecken dabei aber nicht nur die Windungen der Höhle, in die wir uns



Moreover, he considered the tractate, of all texts, to be the supreme form of this attention to the presentation of the argument, *Darstellung*. As he wrote about the tractate in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*: ‘*Darstellung ist der Inbegriff ihrer Methode. Methode ist Umweg. Darstellung als Umweg – das ist denn der methodische Charakter des Traktats.*’<sup>35</sup> An extensive discussion of this, however, will have to be postponed to a subsequent paragraph. ‘*Methode ist Umweg.*’

These four ‘works’ – the Mishnah, both Talmuds, and to a lesser degree, the Tosefta – represent the bulk of tradition from the rabbinic era, an important part of Jewish history which ran from about 70 CE with the establishment by the aforementioned Yohanan ben Zakkai of the academy of Yabneh after the destruction of the Second Temple, and lasted up to the First Crusades, after which, in the words of Stemberger, ‘the rabbinic writings themselves became the object of commentaries and compendia, i.e.

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vorwogen, sondern genießen dieses Entdeckerglück nur auf dem Grunde jener anderen rhythmischen Seligkeit, die da im Abspulen eines Knäuels besteht. Eine solche Gewißheit vom kunstreich gewundenen Knäuel, das wir abspulen – ist das nicht das Glück jeder, zumindest prosaförmigen, Produktivität? Und im Haschisch sind wir genießende Prosawesen höchster Potenz.’ (IV, 414). Passages such as these, singing the praises of study, were among the first to arouse our suspicion that there is indeed a very profound and deep-seated elective affinity of Benjamin’s texts with the form and content, for they are inextricably and dialectically linked of the Jewish tradition, and it is only after one has immersed oneself in the latter that its affinity with the former reveals itself, hence the detour that is this first chapter. Lieven De Cauter also briefly discusses Benjamin’s penchant for the thread and the labyrinth as metaphors for the text in *De Dwerg in de Schaakautomaat*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>35</sup> ‘(Re)presentation is the quintessence of their method. Method is detour. Representation as detour – that would thus be the methodical character of the tractate.’ (I, 208). As we will come to discuss in the final chapter, the word *Inbegriff* has a very special connotation in Benjamin’s work, as it tends to be associated with theological patterns of thought.

they became primary texts.<sup>36</sup> Next to this so-called Talmudic literature, however, there also is the vast corpus of rabbinic *midrashim*, or interpretations, partly collected in the *Midrash Rabbah*. The rabbinic *midrashim* usually refer to the individual books of the Bible (the collection containing interpretations of Genesis, for instance, is called *Bereshith Rabbah* or *Genesis Rabbah*, sections of which at least were known to Benjamin, and indeed part of the cultural baggage of most Jews). These *midrashim* are generally divided into two different types, halakhic and aggadic, concerning themselves with either the statutes of the law, the *Halakhah*, or with the incidental stories, parables and illustrations accompanying and clarifying the law, the *Aggadah*. This elementary division also applies to the Talmud, which, even though its emphasis lies primarily on *Halakhah*, still includes a massive amount of *Aggadah* (editions of the Talmud usually number well over thirty volumes). Yet the distinction of *Halakhah* and *Aggadah* is not always as clear as it is presented here. *Halakhah* frequently flows over into *Aggadah*, and vice versa; stories and parables may sometimes culminate in the formulation of a halakhic precept or gradually and almost clandestinely develop it. Even though the distinction is recognised as such, *Halakhah* and *Aggadah* are so thoroughly interwoven in the Jewish tradition that it would be perfectly impossible to extricate either one of them from it without ripping the texture apart. The phenomenon of *midrash* manifested itself very early in the Rabbinic period

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<sup>36</sup> Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 4.

as an exegetical or homiletical method or technique, and continued well into the late Middle Ages, with the *Zohar* as an immense mystical *midrash* on the Torah. We could go even further and say, quoting Barry Holtz, that in a sense – a sense which we are gradually approaching – ‘almost all Jewish writing, at least until the nineteenth century’, can be seen as ‘a kind of Midrash.’<sup>37</sup>

Simultaneous with the redaction of both Talmuds, continuing halakhic (and aggadic) activity gradually started to manifest itself in different forms. One particular instance of this halakhic activity are the so-called *she'elot u-teshuvot*, ‘questions and answers’, also known as the *responsa*.<sup>38</sup> These were very specific questions relating to the Law, always dealing with concrete problems in a Jewish community. They were initially put to the *Geonim*, the rabbis from the Babylonian academies, but up to this day, they are used as a means of updating the *Halakhah* to modern times. One topic which, after two thousand years, is still a pressing concern to today’s orthodox and conservative communities, for instance, is the question of the *Agunah*, the widow of a man whose death has not or cannot be certified. Next to these *responsa*, the ‘post-Talmudic’ era (or rather semi-post-Talmudic era, as the Talmud was never actually closed) also saw the emergence of systematic codes and compendia of *Halakhah*, which were less expansive and cumbersome than the gargantuan Talmud.<sup>39</sup> The first of these post-Talmudic

<sup>37</sup> Barry W. Holtz, ‘Midrash’, in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classical Jewish Texts*, pp. 177-211; p. 186.

<sup>38</sup> See *MI*, 36.

<sup>39</sup> On the compendia, see *MI*, 36ff.

compendia is the *She'iltot* of Ahai Gaon, edited in the eighth century. Another early example of halakhic codification is Simon Kaira's ninth-century *Halakhot Gelodot*.<sup>40</sup> Codification and commentary nevertheless remained very much intertwined, something which is exemplified quite well by the fate of the *Mishneh Torah*, a collection compiled by none other than Moses Maimonides during the second half of the twelfth century. This *Mishneh Torah*, literally meaning 'Second Torah', had the ambition to become the only necessary Jewish code of law next to the Torah in a single, complete, practical handbook. But because of this ambition, Maimonides excluded even the minimum of Talmudic discussion and failed to cite any authorities for his decisions. It was not until several later scholars had attempted to supplement the missing references and comment on the decisions themselves that the code, substantially augmented, could assume a position of authority, laying proof upon proof of how deeply the predilection for accumulation and discussion is ingrained within the Jewish tradition. Crucially, the *Shulhan 'Arukh* or 'Set Table', a compendium compiled by Yosef Karo of Safed and published in 1565, was based on a more extensive work written by the same author, the *Beit Yosef*, which did include extensive discussion and references for its decisions, and thus easily assumed the position of authority it has until this day. Supplemented with the glosses by the Polish rabbi Moses Isserles, published as the *Mappah*, 'Tablecloth', and

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<sup>40</sup> For a very lucid and concise overview of the Jewish legal tradition, see David M. Feldman's essay 'The Structure of Jewish Law', in *Jewish Law and Legal Theory*, edited by Martin P. Golding (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 3-19.

reviewing Ashkenazic differences in practice, the code also became inclusive, closing the era of the *Rishonim* and inaugurating the new era of the *Aharonim*, the 'Later Ones.' These compendia in their turn were expanded and updated constantly, resulting most recently in the *Mishnah Berurah* (1892-1898), a commentary emerging from the Ashkenazic community written by Yisrael Me'ir ha-Kohen, and in the *Kaf ha-Hayyim*, a similar work reflecting developments in the Sephardic community and written by Ya'aqov Hayyim Sofer between 1905 and 1957.<sup>41</sup> The latter also included elements from the Lurianic Kabbalah into modern-day halakhic practice.

This brings us to the final important strand in our very cursory overview of the textual appearance of the Jewish tradition: mysticism. Judaism is particularly rich in mystical traditions, which flower at regular intervals in its history, and invariably find themselves in a challenging, yet often enriching position *vis-à-vis* the 'mainstream' tradition described above. The quotation by Gershom Scholem, which we used as one of our mottoes, professing that 'there is a life of tradition that does not merely consist of conservative preservation', may serve as an illustration of this very position, and indeed his own, as well as that of a close friend of his, by the name of Walter Benjamin. As we will have the opportunity to discuss later, Jewish mysticism is often infused with tinges of messianism and a concomitant antinomianism or even anarchism. It has been Scholem's great merit,

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<sup>41</sup> Edward Fram, 'Codification of Law', *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish*

however, to establish this wayward mysticism as a logical necessity of the Jewish tradition, a structural guarantor of its dynamism.<sup>42</sup> Before we go on to discuss the nature of the Jewish tradition as such, let us, for completeness' sake, briefly introduce the main mystical traditions. Next to the mystical books in the Bible, for instance Ezekiel, the apocryphal Enoch and sections from Jeremiah and Isaiah in the aforementioned *Nevi'im*, the first mystical movement proper is that of *Merkabah*, also known as the mysticism of the chariot, referring to the eponymous dream in Ezekiel. There is a separate tradition of Jewish gnosis occurring around the same time as its Christian variant (and indeed cross-fertilizing it). During the later Middle Ages, there are the different traditions of Kabbalah, literally meaning 'tradition', and starting with Abraham Abulafia's *Sefer Yetzirah*, the anonymous and very influential *Zohar*, incorporating the *Ra'ja Mehemna*, and concluding with a series of books in the tradition of the Lurianic Kabbalah, named after its (mythical?) founder Isaac Luria. It is this mystical tradition which is the main subject of Franz Joseph Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition in dem alten Bunde und ihre Beziehung zur Kirche des neuen Bundes mit vorzüglicher Rücksicht auf die Kabbalah*, although the

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*Religion*, pp. 163-165; p. 165.

<sup>42</sup> Scholem has produced a vast array of material on the subject of Jewish mysticism, but among the earliest publications there is a work that is still considered authoritative today, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), which was first published in English in 1941 as *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and subsequently translated into German by the author in 1957. Most discussions of Jewish mysticism, including our own, still owe a considerable debt to this work.

book does incorporate a wealth of material from the 'mainstream' Jewish tradition too, as we shall see in the next chapter.

The reason why we are glossing over the mystical strands of the Jewish tradition is that most of its doctrines and concepts are far too intricate for a cursory discussion, positively impossible to explain in layman's terms and, for these very reasons, extremely unlikely to have influenced the work of Walter Benjamin in any meaningful way. More plausible candidates are those concepts and doctrines which, although sometimes springing from a mystical source, became firmly rooted in mainstream Judaism, which still remains the only, and very necessary 'Vorschule' to any serious study of mysticism. Certain impatient authors, however, do not always seem prepared to heed that warning: as we will point out later, scholars such as Harold Bloom and Susan Handelman, whose work has all but made *Kabbalah* a household name in modern literary studies, appear very eager indeed to jump in at the bottomless end.

## II

This necessarily brief overview does not present a comprehensive picture of the Jewish tradition. In fact, no overview, however extensive, could ever do so without drawing up a Borgesian map (and having to leave enough space for itself as well as its own composition process to be included, thereby falling foul of Russell's paradox<sup>43</sup>). The Jewish tradition is open-ended in three different ways. Firstly because the process of interpretation, *midrash* – of which more later, in no way limits the number of interpretations that can be retrieved from Torah, but rather encourages renewed engagement with the text and attempts to reaffirm the relevance of the Torah to the present. Thus the Torah, although it remains 'supreme in authority', is by no means a rigid entity, the meaning of which was fixed at one point in the past and has not changed since. Most often, these changes of meaning do not so much challenge the orthodoxy directly as find

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<sup>43</sup> In the story 'On Exactitude in Science', Borges tells of an empire in which 'the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck up a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it.' (Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 325). Any attempt to summarise a construction as grand and monstrous as the Jewish tradition must necessarily fall prey to the hybridic desire to draw up exactly such a map, a map which would be too large in practical terms but which would also be infinite and unfinishable in logical and philosophical terms, as it would have to include itself within this tradition and then produce a new map of the tradition including itself as a map of tradition, and so on and so forth. This latter problem is not unlike Russell's paradox of sets, whereby set S contains all sets x such that x is not a member of x. According to this description, S would member of itself only if S is not a member of itself. Even though they do not seem



unexpected ways in which the Torah heaps proof upon proof of its own divine message. The open-ended approach to interpretation, traditionally at any rate, does not often result in a meaning that is the mirror opposite of what orthodoxy has assumed until then, although the Jewish tradition does know such radically wayward figures as Shabbetai Tsevi, in whose theology redemption would come about through sin.<sup>44</sup> Yet when the community finds itself confronted with a commandment it finds particularly hard to enforce, the midrashic imagination will be called upon to reinterpret the orthodoxy, as happened with the infamous *lex talionis* of Ex. 21:24 ('An eye for an eye'), when the word *mammash*, 'the removal of an eye of the perpetrator', was read as *mammon*, 'financial compensation' (B. *Baba Kamma*, 84a). Secondly, and in the most obvious sense, tradition is open-ended because interpretation, halakhic and aggadic activity, continues up to this day, and will do so until the Last Day. Codifications and commentaries continue to be written and added one to the other (even though a truly authoritative compendium of Halakhah for the Reformist and Reconstructionist movements is still lacking). This is a very important point for our argument, and one to which we will return later: as we mentioned above, the *Mappah* was added onto the *Shulhan 'Arukh*, the *Maggid Mishneh*, the *Hagahot Maimuniyot*, the *Migdal Oz* and the *Mishneh LaMelekh* were added onto the

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to have a great deal in common, this paradoxical construction is something which would sound as familiar to the theologian as it would to the mathematician.

<sup>44</sup> See Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 5: Erlösung durch Sünde*, translated by Michael Brock (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992). This topic fascinated Borges, too, and it occurs in several of his short stories, including 'Three Versions of Judas'

*Mishneh Torah* and Rashi's commentaries were published in the margins of the Talmud, which in its turn includes the whole of the Mishnah. From this perspective, the Jewish tradition is not only an accumulative process, it also creates what we could call a homogeneous space. Later additions and supplements actually become part of the original work, creating an entirely new work while at the same time establishing a firm continuity between past and present. Thread upon thread is woven into and onto the original fabric, gradually turning it into a thick, multi-dimensional space in which every verse, every term and every concept never refers to one thing only, but rather forms a knot uniting and dispersing innumerable threads.<sup>45</sup> This is intimately intertwined with the rabbinic methods of interpretation, which, as we shall explain later, tended towards the atomisation of Scripture, taking it apart into its most minute building blocks only to reconstruct an entire – moral and religious – conceptual universe from them. As we will again show later, this strategy has a remarkable structural parallel in Walter Benjamin's micrological readings. The spatial metaphors we used in describing the Jewish tradition are crucial, so much so that they even determine the very layout of the Talmud. On a typical Talmudic page, which is traditionally in folio format, the original Mishnaic ruling is set high up in the centre, usually preceded by the formula 'it is taught'. In the column

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and 'The Sect of the Thirty', in *Collected Fictions*, pp. 163-167 and 443-445 respectively.

<sup>45</sup> Kafka also appears to have had a predilection for metaphors of weaving threads, as is most apparent in his short story *Die Sorge des Hausvaters*, as well as in the unfinished novel *Das Schloß*, and this metaphor of the anxiety of tradition did not go unnoticed to Benjamin, as we will point out in a subsequent paragraph.

straight underneath and set in the same type is the Gemara, abbreviated with the letters gimel-mem (גמ) immediately preceding it. Additions of lesser importance or of later origin are set in a smaller font than the central passages, so that, in fact, adding to the law becomes physically easier as time passes, so to speak, although the labour of deciphering the latest additions becomes more cumbersome. The commentary of Rashi is set in a single column next to the Mishnah and *Gemara* in the inner margin, and the commentary of the *Tosafot* is set at the other side of the central block of text. In the outer margins are cross-references to medieval codes of law, including amongst others the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Shulhan Arukh*. Further notes and commentaries, as well as cross-references to the Torah, textual emendations and printer's notes, set in ever decreasing type, crowd the page up to its very edges. The effect of this layout is to create a sense of space and depth, both by foregrounding the central Mishnaic passage and by framing it with subsequent commentaries. This actually mirrors a precept found in the Mishnah itself, which admonishes the aforementioned Men of the Great Assembly to erect a fence around the law (the so-called *Seyag la-Torah*) in order to protect the original commandment from losing its strength.<sup>46</sup> As it is stated in the first paragraph of the Mishnah-tractate *Avot*:

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<sup>46</sup> This is in its turn reminiscent of the kabbalist concept of the breaking of the vessels, *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, according to which during creation the divine glory of God was poured into vessels which subsequently broke and spread shards or *Klipot* throughout the created world. Sparks of the divine glory still stick to these fragments or shards, and every time a Jew performs a *mitzvah*, these sparks are 'kicked up'. This is the origin of the kabbalist and hasidic idea that when every Jew on earth would perform a *mitzvah* at the same time, the Messiah would come, as it would completely reconstitute the divine glory lost at creation. The

'The latter [i.e. the *Kenesseth ha-Gedolah*] used to say three things: be patient in [the administration of ] justice, rear many disciples and make a fence around the Torah.' (M. *Avot*: I, 1). Thus the text of the Talmud can be seen to contain divine wisdom in a double sense of the word: rather than signifying it or referring to it, the text physically contains divinity, circumscribing it and by this act of circumscription cupping it, so to speak, as you would cup water in your hands.

In this accumulative process, the internal hierarchy between the Mishnaic or Talmudic texts and later additions is not always uniform. Whereas the older works are sometimes given precedence and attributed greater authority than the later works, deference is generally made to the accrued knowledge of later authors, true to the principle that the Law must also be relevant to the present rather than merely reverential to the past, a tendency that would again run counter to historicist sensibilities for the *Urquelle* or the 'pure' source text, uncontaminated by history. As Feldman formulated it so succinctly 'the hierarchy is one of learning, rather than of authority.'<sup>47</sup> This

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importance of this analogy lies in the very physical and spatial metaphors used in the story, echoing the Mishnaic-Talmudic image of the divinity of the text as something which can almost spill out of the book. Another interesting parallel in this matter are the rabbinic injunctions for treating a Torah-scroll, which suggest parallels between the scrolls and the rabbis themselves as physical repositories of the divine word, a notion which is also illustrated by several *aggadot* about the tannaitic sages (see William Scott Green, 'Romancing the Tome', pp. 159-161; see also Martin S. Jaffee, 'A Rabbinic Ontology of the Written and Spoken Word: On Discipleship, Transformative Knowledge and the Living Texts of Oral Torah', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65:3 (Fall 1997), pp. 525-549; pp. 538-540).

<sup>47</sup> David M. Feldman, 'The Structure of Jewish Law', p. 15. On the principle of *halakhah k'batra'ei* (or *hilkhata ke-vatrai*, depending on the transliteration), see

principle of *halakhah k'batra'ei*, 'the law follows the latest ruling,' has been embedded in the canon of rabbinic decision-making from as early as geonic times, and it brings us to the third way in which the Jewish tradition resists closure. As difficult as the distinction between what is *halakhic* and what is *aggadic* may be, most of the works cited in the overview presented above are part of the legal tradition, or *Halakhah* proper. Collections of rabbinic *midrashim* like *Midrash Rabbah*, *Mekhilta*, *Sifra* and *Sifrei*, to name but a few, are considered to be *baraitot*, literally meaning 'outside', and not part of the law as such. These works were not included in the Mishnah, either by editorial decision or simply because they had not yet been written. They are, however, paid due attention in the Talmud, standing alongside *mishnayyot* and *Gemara*. Similarly, as we saw above, the mystical writings of the kabbalists were not originally part of the legal tradition, but elements of the Lurianic Kabbalah, for instance, have recently been incorporated into halakhic compendia (the above-mentioned *Kaf ha-Hayyim* of Ya'aqov Hayyim Sofer). It appears that the principle of accumulation, which is such a distinctive feature of the Jewish tradition, is not merely reflected in the linear continuation in time of an ongoing process, adding new material to an existing corpus, but also in the revision and reinterpretation of that very corpus, thickening its very fabric. Tradition in the Jewish sense is as close as one can get to a transitive noun, or a substantive verb, it represents the process of interpretation as well as the fluctuating collective of these

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also Daniel Sinclair, 'Halakhah', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*,

interpretations at the same time, embedded, as they are, in ‘the Jewish mind.’ As David Feldman writes: ‘Philosophic works of the Middle Ages partake of the same status [as the non-halakhic Bible commentaries]: they are extralegal and, as elements in the “Jewish mind,” help shape the picture, but are only auxiliary to the legal process.’<sup>48</sup> Tradition, then, is the act and shaping of the Law in the widest possible sense.

In a discussion of the study of Talmud, Adin Steinsalz writes: ‘In the opinion of virtually every modern scholar “the Talmud was never closed” – not only in the historical-factual sense, but also with regard to the manner of its understanding and study. The method of Talmud study was an extension of Talmud itself; its interpretation and analysis required the student continually to involve himself in the discussion, to evaluate its questions and argumentation. As a result, abstract reasoning and the dialectical method became an integral part of the Jewish culture.’<sup>49</sup> This echoes the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah*, seeing study as a divine occupation, as well as the idea of an open-ended tradition, but it also gives an impression of the ‘transcendental’ nature of study. The text of the Torah is very much seen as a living entity, ‘a trope for God’, and by a similar metonymic movement, those engaged in the study of Torah are considered to be sharing, as equals, in its divine emanation. Their interpretations, whether they were considered

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pp. 293-294, p. 293.

<sup>48</sup> David M. Feldman, ‘The Structure of Jewish Law’, p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Adin Steinsalz, ‘Talmud’, in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 953-957, p. 957.

authoritative or not, are considered to contain aspects of the divine, which they do not forfeit even when replaced by a new ruling. There is no sense of an older interpretation being somehow antiquarian, redundant, or, God forbid, disposable. Accumulation, creative conservation and mindful remembrance are the keywords.<sup>50</sup> And, as we have seen, this principle works both ways: older texts are not automatically considered more authoritative than younger interpretations. Throughout the Jewish tradition, there has in fact never been that sense of dogmatic exclusivity which has been shown almost consistently by the Christian church. This may not be unconnected with the disappearance of the central Jewish authority after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, after which the centre of authority shifted to the academies of Yavneh, Usha', Sephoris, Beit She'arim and Tiberias in *Eretz Yisrael* and later Nehardea, Sura and Pumbeditha in Babylonia. Admittedly, final authority was usually considered to lie with one academy at any one time, but this neither meant that they could tyrannically assert their right, nor that another academy could not gain ascendancy in time. Even before their gradual demise towards the end of the tenth century, when the academies dissipated into a new stage of the Diaspora, it is fair to say that Judaism no longer had one single centre of authority. Or at least not a physical centre of authority: as we suggested above, the locus of the divine

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<sup>50</sup> In this respect, as we will discuss in the final chapter, the methods of the Jewish tradition shows a remarkable similarity to the methodology of the unfinished *Passagen-Werk*, which now exists as a huge collection of fragments and quotations. In one of the *Konvolute*, Benjamin reveals his main focus to have been exactly these discarded fragments of past writing: 'die Lumpen, den Abfall: die

shifted from the actual Temple to the text of Torah, which then became heir to some of the spatial and physical metaphors used to describe the Temple as a 'container' of God on earth.<sup>51</sup> But even when the Jerusalem Temple was still standing, there were several smaller temples both inside *Eretz Yisrael* and outside, and despite the predictable rivalries between the Jerusalem Temple and the other temples, there was never an attempt to tyrannically centralise the entire cultic and religious experience of Judaism. As was mentioned before, discussion and dissent have always been important factors within the Jewish tradition, finding their most radical expression in the antinomian streak of its messianic movements. But even within

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will ich nicht inventarisieren sondern sie auf die einzig mögliche Weise zu ihrem Rechte kommen lassen: sie verwenden.' (V, 574; N1a, 8).

<sup>51</sup> In the first volume of *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, Molitor uses a similar analogy between the physical Temple and the spiritual Temple (i.e. the Torah), yet, most significantly, his analogy is based on the physical appearance of the original Torah scrolls. These scrolls lack both punctuation and spacing, resulting in an extremely dense consonantal text, which Molitor compares to the veil that conceals the holiest of holies in the Temple: 'Das ursprüngliche Sepher Thorah von Moscheh hatte, wie jetzt noch jeder Abschrift derselben in den Synagogen, weder Vokale noch irgend einige Unterscheidungs- oder Lesezeichen. Es sind darin weder Kapitel noch Verse unterschieden, selbst die Worte nicht sehr merklich von einander: es ist alles fast nur ein einziges fortlaufendes, bloß [sic] hier und da durch einzelne leere Stellen (B'thuchoth und S'thumoth genannt) unterbrochenes, Ganzes, in welchem so geringe Zwischenräume sich finden, daß Buchstabe an Buchstabe, Wort an Wort so dicht zusammengedrängt sind, wodurch es dem Unkundigen durchaus unmöglich wird, sich ohne Anleitung darin zu finden, und den fortlaufenden Zusammenhang aufzufassen. Gleichwie nämlich alles innere Geistige nur dem geweihten innern Auge sich erschließt, das leibliche Auge aber bloß das äußere Gewand der Innerlichkeit zu schauen vermag, und wenn es auch weiter eindringen wollte, doch nimmermehr das wahre innere erblicken, sondern nur in Unordnung geraten würde: also hat man auch in der alten Kirche, ehe der Vorhang zerrissen, nicht nur das Heilige und Allerheiligste des leiblichen Tempels, sondern auch das Heilige und Allerheiligste des geistigen Tempels, der Thorah, nämlich die Vokale und Accente dem äußern Auge entzogen, und bloß den Vorhof des Tempels und den äußern Bau der Thorah, die Consonanten, zur ehrfurchtsvollen Verehrung öffentlich dargestellt.' (MI, 21-22).



mainstream Judaism, the simultaneous presence of varying or sometimes dissenting practices and opinions has been tolerated. Witness for instance the combination of the Sephardic *Shulhan 'Arukh* with the Ashkenazic *Mappah*. In the *Halakhah*, the entire discussion leading up to a decision (a discussion which, in its turn, can be re-opened at any moment), often encompassing several generations of scholars, was included in the text. Dissenting opinions were stated and acknowledged, and the decision, reached by a majority vote, was preceded by the statement 'in this matter, the *Halakhah* is in accordance with such-and-such.' As the Mishnah-tractate '*Eduyyoth*' states: 'And why do they record the opinions of Shammai and Hillel to set them aside? – To teach the following generations that a man should not [always] persist in his opinion, for behold, the fathers of the world did not persist in their opinion.' (M. '*Eduyyoth*': I, 4).<sup>52</sup>

This form of mutual respect, equality and humility before the Law is not just prevalent in space, as is witnessed for instance by the courtesy shown in the famous discussions between the rival Houses of Hillel and Shammai, but also in time. Just as there is no feeling of anomaly or anachronism in the appearance of a third-century midrash side by side with a ninth-century

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<sup>52</sup> On the majority rule, see for instance the next paragraph of the same tractate: 'And why do they record the opinion of a single person among the many, when the *Halakhah* must be according to the opinion of the many? So that if a court prefers the opinion of the single person it may depend on him. For no court may set aside the decision of another court unless it is greater than it in wisdom and in number. If it was greater than it in wisdom but not in number, in number but not in wisdom, it may not set aside its decision, unless it is greater than it in wisdom and number.' (B. '*Eduyyot*': I,5). Despite the great importance attached to the majority decision, it is notable that the voice of the individual was not drowned out by the multitude, as the wisdom of an opinion in itself made it worth considering.

commentary, the present-day student of Talmud can see Yehuda ha-Nasi, Yohanan ben Zakkai or Rashi as his contemporaries, united in study, one in the quest for God through an understanding of his law. In this sense, tradition is much more than the linear accumulation of knowledge, and a far cry from the ideology of progress whereby every step forward is a 'transgression', i.e. passes by the past, leaving it lifeless in its wake. It is easy to see in which notion of tradition Benjamin's famous angel of history has its roots, or at least where the affinities of his own preoccupations can be found. This form of tradition, Jewish tradition, is an organic rather than a logical entity. It is a construction, but not constructed. On a micrological level, this pattern is mimicked by the nature of the texts within the tradition: 'Since the Talmudic discussion of any subject within the tractates, however, follows not a logical but an organic sequence, and since all of Jewish law is interconnected, with analogies adduced from one sphere to the other, references from the whole of the Talmud are brought to bear on the subject at hand in the relevant literature.'<sup>53</sup> This way, the *Mishnah Avot*'s statement on the Torah quoted above can be extended towards Jewish tradition as a whole: 'Turn it over and turn it over for all is in it.' There is a dominating, and sometimes imposing, feeling that tradition encompasses everything, past, present and future. This can result in a not unambiguous, or even negative, feeling of powerlessness, as it is voiced by, for instance, Micha Joseph Berdyczewski: 'Our eyes are not our own, our dreams and our

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<sup>53</sup> David M. Feldman, 'The Structure of Jewish Law', p. 5.

thoughts are not our own, our will is not the one implanted in us; everything we were taught long ago, everything has been handed down to us.’<sup>54</sup> But it also results in a real desire for a learning, a doctrine, that can incorporate and explain everything. And it is in this sense that Benjamin’s comment should be read, stating that no doctrine is worth studying which would be incapable of explaining the art of reading coffee-grounds.<sup>55</sup> It is also because of this ‘traditional’ desire for an all-encompassing knowledge that Benjamin has been described as the last *Homo Universalis*.

At this point, it may be useful to dwell a bit more extensively on one of the strands that have been underlying our argument up to now, and to which we will come in a subsequent paragraph (true to the notion of the doctrine, our method is one of gradual approach and circumambulation rather than immediate analysis and exposition.<sup>56</sup> Or to repeat Benjamin’s maxim once again: ‘Methode ist Umweg.’). As we mentioned before, the concept of

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Hartman, ‘Imagination’, in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 451-472, p. 461. This topic bears more than a passing resemblance to the Saussurean idea of language as a law that is always already there, elaborated by the (Jewish) Jacques Derrida into the notion of the *déjà-là* (See Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 14 ff.)

<sup>55</sup> In a discussion with Scholem about Benjamin’s plan to extend the Kantian paradigm to include a broader concept of experience, while lending it greater authority by turning it into a *Lehre*, a doctrine in the theological sense – a plan which was recorded in the essay *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* of 1918 – Benjamin remarked: ‘Eine Philosophie, die nicht die Möglichkeit der Weissagung aus dem Kaffeesatz einbezieht und explizieren kann, kann keine wahre sein.’ (quoted in *Anmerkungen der Herausgeber*, II, 938). We will discuss the relevance of Benjamin’s *Auseinandersetzung* with Kant in the abovementioned essay, and particularly the concept of the *Lehre*, in our final chapter.

<sup>56</sup> There is an interesting, almost organic link between the history of Western thought and the act of walking, from Aristotle’s Peripatetic school and the age-old phenomenon of itinerant story-tellers to the wandering Rabbi and his students, called *Chabberim*, which is translated by Molitor as ‘Gefährten’, literally meaning ‘companions on a journey’ (MI, 185 ff.; see also chapter three).

history used in a tradition like the Jewish one is diametrically opposed to the historicist notion of history, in which the past no longer has any real existence in the present and can only be reconstructed as another 'virtual present', with which the 'real' present in its turn has very little to do other than in the form of causal links or logical connections, if the past in question is not too distant. In a traditional perspective, however, the past is seen to exist as a function of the present, and the present exists (or ought to exist) in function of the (possibly utopian) future.<sup>57</sup> One consequence of this notion is that, in the traditional perspective, nothing is ever perceived as 'past', 'over' or 'irrevocably lost'.<sup>58</sup> Nor is the past seen as an irreducible difference, the establishment of which is the basis of historicist criticism. On the contrary, tradition exhibits a deep-seated, thoroughly religious sense of solidarity between past, present and future. A good example of this is the annual Passover or *Pesach* festival, commemorating the Exodus of Israel from

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<sup>57</sup> The import of this opposition between the traditional and the historicist perspective is made clear by the following quotation from the *Passagen-Werk*, in which Benjamin explains 'wie diese Arbeit – vergleichbar der Methode der Atomzertrümmerung – die ungeheuren Kräfte der Geschichte freimacht, die im "Es war einmal" der klassischen Historie gebunden liegen. Die Geschichte, welche die Sache zeigte, "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist", war das stärkste Narkotikum des Jahrhunderts.' ([N 3, 4], V, 578).

<sup>58</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr quotes Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung*, saying: 'For Israel "the memory of its history does not form a point fixed in the past, a point which year after year becomes increasingly past. It is a memory which is really not past at all, but eternally present."' (Paul Mendes-Flohr, 'History', in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 371-387; p. 372). It is interesting to see that Rosenzweig, a contemporary author with whose work Benjamin was certainly familiar, also characterises the Jewish concept of history as emphatically opposed to the historicist perspective. But he was certainly not the only one to be drawn to this notion at the time: Ernst Bloch, Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber and Benjamin himself are among the authors who question the epistemological and political claims of historicism by drawing on elements from the Jewish tradition.

Egypt. The rituals and the language used in the act of remembrance, the *Pesach Haggadah*, are explicitly focused on the actuality of this event for all Jews, stating that ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt.’ This actuality – which is not the sentimental *Einfühlung* or identification of the petty bourgeois with the past lambasted by Benjamin, but rather a pre-emptive *Einfühlung* of the past with the present, its future – is what Neusner termed the ‘vivid contemporaneity of tradition’, and it comes to the fore even more explicitly at the end of the *Pesach Haggadah*: ‘Forever after, in every generation, everyone must think of himself as having gone forth from Egypt, for we read in the Torah, “In that day thou shalt teach thy son, saying, All this is because of what God did for me when I went forth from Egypt.” It was not only our forefathers that the Holy One... redeemed. Us too, the living, he redeemed together with them.’<sup>59</sup> It is this view of history which provides Judaism with its most elementary *religio*, linking the present to the past and both to a future redemption promised in revelation, a *religio* which

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Jacob Neusner, ‘The Study of Religion as the Study of Tradition: Judaism’, *History of Religions*, 14 (1975), pp. 191-206; p. 192. Another interesting parallel of the Jewish ritual of remembrance and Benjamin’s own textual practice as a *Geschichtsphilosoph* is the emphasis on the collectivity of experience. As David Roskies writes: ‘In Judaism, memory is a collective mandate, both in terms of what is recalled and how it is recalled. From the Deuteronomic injunctions to “remember the days of old” (32:7) and to “remember what Amalek did to you” (25:17) to the persistent theme of remembering “that you were slaves in Egypt,” the content of Jewish memory has been the collective saga as first recorded in Scripture and as later recalled in collective, ritual settings.’ (‘Memory’, in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 581-586; p. 581). Benjamin’s many writings on Baudelaire, on the artwork in modern times, as well as his notes for the *Passagen-Werk*, frequently revolve around the possibility of a collective experience and its revolutionary potential (see for instance some of the notes in *Konvolut K* focusing on ‘das Kollektivum’, ‘das Kollektivbewußtsein’ or ‘das träumende Kollektiv’ (V, 491-492) However fascinating this similarity is, it would again lead us too far to explore it).

is thus eminently theological in kind. Benjamin's *Geschichtsphilosophie* appears to have taken its inspiration from this Jewish concept of remembrance, as he interprets the literally religious attention to the past as an inversed messianic hope for the future:

Bekanntlich war es den Juden untersagt, der Zukunft nachzuforschen. Die Thora und das Gebet unterweisen sie dagegen im Eingedenken. Dieses entzauberte ihnen die Zukunft, der die verfallen sind, die sich bei den Wahrsagern Auskunft holen. Den Juden wurde die Zukunft aber darum doch nicht zur homogenen und leeren Zeit. Denn in ihr war jede Sekunde die kleine Pforte, durch die der Messias treten konnte.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> 'It is well known that the Jews were forbidden to investigate the future. The Torah and prayer, on the contrary, teach them to commemorate. To them, this disenchanted the future, to which those who seek advice from fortune-tellers have become slaves. But the future did therefore not become a homogeneous and empty time to the Jews. Since every second in the future was the small gate through which the Messiah could enter.' (I, 704). The Jewish concept of remembrance or commemoration becomes increasingly important in Benjamin's work towards the end of his life, cumulating in this melancholy parable, the last addition to the *Thesen über den Begriff der Geschichte*. In his book *L'Ange de L'Histoire: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), Stéphane Mosès summarises the significance of this concept as follows: 'C'est dans cette remise en question de la toute-puissance de la réalité historique au nom d'une exigence éthique qu'il faut chercher le sens "théologique" de la dernière philosophie de l'histoire de Benjamin. Les concepts dérivés de la mystique juive ont précisément pour fonction de subvertir la Raison historique en donnant une nouvelle chance à tout ce qui, dans le passé, a été écrasé, oublié ou laissé pour compte. C'est ainsi que la notion benjaminienne de "remémoration" (*Eingedenken*) reprend la catégorie juive du "ressouvenir" (*Zekher*), qui ne désigne pas la conservation dans la mémoire des événements du passé, mais leur réactualisation dans l'expérience présente.' (p. 156). As Mosès has proven, the concept of remembrance is one of the major and undeniable 'Hebraisms' in Benjamin's thought, and our argument would have been incomplete without at least a cursory mention of it. However, we are mainly concerned with the Jewish elements in the actual form of Benjamin's thought and

But whereas in Judaism, the so-called contemporaneity of the past is enacted in language, symbols and rituals such as the eating of the paschal lamb, Benjamin's philosophy eradicates the radical separation of the past from the present, imposed by the ideology of historicism, in his '*Archäologie des Jüngstvergangenen*' or 'archaeology of the recent past.' This archaeology is exemplified in the figure of the collector, who collects the so-called refuse of history ('*Abfall der Geschichte*'), the immense diversity of bits and bobs discarded in the process of progress, to which still stick fragments of the utopian hopes and expectations held by the past. This obviously requires an extensive discussion, and we will have the opportunity to come back to this topic in the final chapter, but with the foregoing in mind, even this short description will suffice to highlight the crystal-clear correspondences between this image and the kabbalist metaphor of the *Klipot* and kicking up the sparks. Benjamin's collector (which, by extension, covers himself as a philosopher of history) and the Jewish tradition also come together in one single aspect here, both approaching it from a slightly different angle but ending up in exactly the same spot: the physical and spatial metaphors of history and tradition. The Mishnaic admonition to 'turn it over and over' applies perfectly to the image of the collector turning over a children's toy from twenty years ago, and

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writings, rather than the 'Judaisms' in their content – even though this distinction, as we mentioned before, is close to meaningless in our present context – and we must therefore gloss over this theme lest we lose the thread of our argument.

reading from it the utopian hopes that the recent past invested in the future, the obligation which the present has towards the past. But before we attempt to paint the whole picture of Benjamin's philosophy of history and its correspondences to, and elective affinities with, elements in the Jewish tradition, it is best to first complete our as yet very brief picture of the Jewish tradition itself. This way, we will be able to see that these apparently tangential correspondences are actually symptoms of an underlying structural resemblance, or rather mimesis, as we are convinced that the affinity was consciously elected by Benjamin to provide him with the authoritative theoretical foundation upon which to erect his alternative to the then dominant, and according to him catastrophic, ideologies of progress and historicism.<sup>61</sup>

The aforementioned dynamism of Jewish tradition is probably best exemplified by the emphasis of the process of interpretation rather than merely the results of it, as important and authoritative the latter may be. In the words of Aaron Lichtenstein: 'The *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah* charges the Jew to acquire knowledge of Torah, insofar as he is able; but it addresses itself primarily to the process rather than the result.'<sup>62</sup> With such an emphasis, it is easy to see why not even an 'overruled' interpretation could

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<sup>61</sup> Although he presents an altogether more cursory and selective approach of the Jewish tradition, Stéphane Mosès comes to a similar diagnosis: '*Critique de la continuité temporelle, critique de la causalité historique, critique de l'idéologie du progrès*, tels sont les trois thèmes à travers lesquels le travail du théologico-politique vient miner les fondements mêmes de la vision positiviste de l'histoire.' (*l'Ange de l'Histoire*, p. 157).

<sup>62</sup> Aaron Lichtenstein, 'Study', in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 931-937, p. 931.



legitimately be considered disposable. A rabbinic interpretation is revered as much for its authority as for its bearing witness to the divine act that gave birth to it, study. It cannot be stressed enough that study, the process of interpretation and the search for knowledge, is considered to be an act of devotion, competing only with prayer as the fundamental religious duty of the Jew.<sup>63</sup> This is of course not to say that *Talmud Torah* took precedence over the love of God or the love of one's neighbour: on the contrary, it was considered not only to be a prime expression of this, but also to be the shortest and most direct path to a life in accordance with all of God's commands (one of the predominant ideas in the *Mishnah*-tractate *Avot*). Communion and communication with the divine, study and prayer, must lead to a participation in the divine. And in Judaism, communication *with* the divine automatically meant communication *in* the divine, in language. Exactly how inextricably the process of tradition, study, is related to language, is borne out by the Hebrew word for tradition, *masorah* or *masoret*. 'Franz Molitor,' Nathan Rotenstreich writes, 'observed that *masorah* is implicit in the biblical text because of the nature of the Hebrew language: it is written only in consonants. To read Hebrew texts aloud requires a combination of vowels and consonants and involves in this very

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<sup>63</sup> '*Talmud Torah* became a distinct and powerful form of religious experience for the Jews. Study was more than a search for knowledge – it was an act of devotion and a form of prayer.' Janet Aviad, 'Education', in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, p. 156.

fact the establishment of textual vocalisation which facilitates the transmission of an oral rendition of the written word.<sup>64</sup>

In the narrow, technical sense of the word, the *Masorah* refers to an apparatus for the writing and reading of a biblical text. Biblical Hebrew, as well as most texts in contemporary Hebrew, contains no vowels, and originally did not even contain spacing, so it had to be vocalised in the most radical sense, literally by being voiced, by being read aloud.<sup>65</sup> By using

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<sup>64</sup> Nathan Rotenstreich, 'Tradition', in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, p. 1008. Rotenstreich does not quote Molitor *verbatim*, and the entry in his bibliography rather mystifyingly reads 'Franz Joseph Molitor, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder Über die Tradition* (1851)', which is not the date of publication of any of the volumes. This may suggest that Rotenstreich has not actually read the work or that he may be paraphrasing from memory (or lecture notes). This, as we will point out in the next chapter, has often seemed to be the case with Molitor's elusive book. Nevertheless, Molitor does write words to the effect of Rotenstreich's paraphrase in book one: 'Das ursprüngliche Sepher Thorah von Moscheh hatte, wie jetzt noch jeder Abschrift derselben in den Synagogen, weder Vokale noch irgend einige Unterscheidungs- oder Lesezeichen. Es sind darin weder Kapitel noch Verse unterschieden, selbst die Worte nicht sehr merklich von einander: es ist alles fast nur ein einziges fortlaufendes, blos hier und da durch einzelne leere Stellen (B'thuchoth und S'thumoth genannt) unterbrochenes, Ganzes, in welchem so geringe Zwischenräume sich finden, daß Buchstabe an Buchstabe, Wort an Wort so dicht zusammengedrängt sind, wodurch es dem Unkundigen durchaus unmöglich wird, sich ohne Anleitung darin zu finden, und den fortlaufenden Zusammenhang aufzufassen. Gleichwie nämlich alles innere Geistige nur dem geweihten innern Auge sich erschließt, das leibliche Auge aber blos das äußere Gewand der Innerlichkeit zu schauen vermag, und wenn es auch weiter eindringen wollte, doch nimmermehr das wahre innere erblicken, sondern nur in Unordnung geraten würde: also hat man auch in der alten Kirche, ehe der Vorhang zerrissen, nicht nur das Heilige und Allerheiligste des leiblichen Tempels, sondern auch das Heilige und Allerheiligste des geistigen Tempels, der Thorah, nämlich die Vokale und Accente dem äußern Auge entzogen, und blos den Vorhof des Tempels und den äußern Bau der Thorah, die Consonanten, zur ehrfurchtsvollen Verehrung öffentlich dargestellt.' (*M* I, 21-22). Note also the analogy between the Temple and the Torah, with the latter assuming some of the physicality of the former (cfr. note 23 above).

<sup>65</sup> The reading of the Torah was traditionally a communal matter, with members of the community reading passages from it in public to celebrate special occasions (such as their coming of age or their wedding). Torah passages are chanted, rather than read, but as the text contains no vowels, no spacing or no accents, the correct pronunciation and cantillation had to be learned in advance of the public reading in

vowel letters initially, and later through an entire system of punctuation, the Masoretic text provides the traditional vocalisation of the Torah, as it was handed down for centuries by schools of Masoretes. The composition of the Masoretic text is thought to have begun as early as the time of Ezra (fifth century BCE). Similar to the page composition of the Talmud, the Masoretic text is written around the consonantal framework of the Biblical text, and like the Talmud, again, its redaction has taken many centuries (probably from 500 BCE until 1000 CE). The Masoretes not only vocalised the biblical text, but also compiled extensive notes on it. They 'directed their attention to such details of the text as the division into words, sentences and paragraphs; vocalizations and accents; and determining which letters must be written large, small, suspended, inverted, or dotted. The Masorah counted the letters, words, and verses in the individual books and in the Bible as a whole and printed out differences between pronunciation (*qeri* [what is read]) and spelling (*ketiv* [what is written]).<sup>66</sup> The term *sevirin* referred to possible but not acceptable alternatives, though the text was left unchanged.'<sup>67</sup> There are three sets of progressively longer masoretic notes: the Minor Masorah, written in the side margins, the Major Masorah, placed on the tops and bottoms of the page, and the Final Masorah, the most

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the synagogue (cfr. Baruch Schwartz, 'Accents', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, pp. 13-14).

<sup>66</sup> This concept is also explained in the first book of *Philosophie der Geschichte*: 'So werden auch oft viele Worte ganz anders gelesen als geschrieben, oft wird auch im Lesen etwas ergänzt, was nicht im Text stehet, welches unter dem Namen קרי ולא כתיב (K'ri w'lo Ch'tibh, geschrieben und nicht gelesen) bekannt ist.' (MI, 55).

extensive annotations, which are included at the end of the Bible. Again, the drive for accumulation is notable, even going so far as to include traditionally unacceptable alternatives, the aforementioned *sevirin*, on the very pages of the Torah. It is this commanding desire for accumulation, extending to unofficial, apocryphal or even possibly subversive elements, which parallels the tense but constant presence of a (messianic) antinomianism under the skin of tradition, and which also must account for much of its dynamism.

It has been suggested that this necessity to vocalise the consonantal Hebrew text might be the locus of the mystery of the Tetragrammaton, the most holy, unpronounceable name of God. The vocalisation of YHWH automatically becomes (Y)aou(HW)ei(H), in other words, the entire sequence of vowels necessary to vocalise language as such. This would firmly root the divinity of God in language, or the divinity of language in God, and would explain the strict proscription against pronouncing the Tetragrammaton, as it would reveal the linguistic essence or being of God. The origin of this *aggadah*, if *aggadah* it is, cannot be traced. It is mentioned in a footnote by Lieven De Caeter, and, as tradition has it when faced with an untraceable interpretation, he received the tradition from Yohanan ben Zakkai, who heard it from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher, as a Halakhah given to Moses on Sinai.<sup>68</sup> The analogy between the

<sup>67</sup> Avraham Walfish, 'Masorah', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, p. 445.

<sup>68</sup> Lieven De Caeter, *De Dwerg in de Schaakautomaat*, p. 77. The formula can be found, for example, in B. 'Eduyyoth, VIII, 7.

Tetragrammaton and the Holiest of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple we have pointed out before hints at an almost physically direct experience of language in the Jewish tradition, whereby the notion of the divinity of language does not derive from an intricate metaphorical displacement, but is experienced directly as the dwelling place of God, or even more literally, as actually *containing* God. This notion of language as a 'container' of the divine is intimately linked with physical and spatial conceptions of the text, and of language as such, we have seen before, as they are reflected in the layout of the Talmud. The concept itself, however, is a focal point of the Jewish tradition, in which the apparently divergent narratives on history, language and divinity intersect much like a Benjaminian *Begriff* unfolds into a Goethean *Ursprung*. This intersection is exemplified in the Talmudic legend explaining the origin and meaning of the so-called *tagin*, or decorative crowns, which are added onto the letters *shin*, *ayin*, *teth*, *nun*, *zayin*, *gimel* and *tzade* (שׁ, ע, ט, ז, ת, נ and צ) without any apparent reason, on the *mezuzah* and *tefillin* scrolls as well as on the (handwritten) Torah scroll. The revealing way in which the rabbis read these ornamental curiosities will finally link the foregoing with the last part of our discussion of the Jewish tradition, *midrash*, and it is worth quoting in its entirety.

## III

When Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing coronets to the letters. Said Moses, 'Lord of the Universe, Who stays Thy hand? [i.e. is there anything wanting in the Torah that these additions are necessary?] He answered, 'There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws'. 'Lord of the Universe', said Moses; 'permit me to see him'. He replied 'Turn thee round'. Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [of R. Akiba's disciples, and listened to the discourses upon the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master 'Whence do you know it?' and the latter replied 'It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai' he was comforted. (B. *Berakhot*, 29b).<sup>69</sup>

This peculiar *aggadah* is like a dense gordian knot in the texture, absorbing several strands of the fabric of the Jewish tradition as it was described above. For one, it ties in with the (retrospective) rabbinic concept

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<sup>69</sup> In the first volume of *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, Molitor refers to the same Talmudic legend to suggest that the concept of secret or hidden meanings of the Torah was deeply engrained within the Jewish tradition: 'Im Thalmud wird bei allen Gelegenheiten der Glaube an die verborgenen Geheimnisse der Schrift als eine ganz unbestrittene Thatsache vorausgesetzt. So heißt es z.B. im Traktat M'nachoth: "Als Moscheh auf den Berg Sinai stieg, sah er, wie der höchstgebenedeite Kronen um die Buchstaben wand" (wodurch auf die

that 'all Torah came from Sinai,' here even stating fairly explicitly that a suspicion of the 'authorial intention' or 'original meaning' need not, indeed should not, arrest the process of interpretation. That is to say, the fact that previous generations, standing closer to the original revelation and exemplified by the scribe or 'author by proxy' of the law that bears his name, understood a particular *mishnah* in a given sense does not absolve future generations from the duty of *Talmud Torah* and from questioning the relevance of that sense to their own age. Of course, using the terms of 'authorial intention' or 'original meaning' can be very deceptive here, as the author of the Torah obviously intended it to mean everything it ever meant, can and will mean. After all, 'all is in it.' The story also emphasises the radically different concept of history inherent in the Jewish tradition. As Robert Gordis wrote: 'It is often maintained that the ancients did not have a sense of history. Hence it was possible for the rabbis to conceive of Jacob studying the Torah with his ancestor Shem, or of David and his warriors being members of a Sanhedrin and arguing points of Jewish law, or of the sinful King Menasseh disputing with God on theological doctrine.'<sup>70</sup> Rather than not having a sense of history, the Jewish tradition has a rivalling sense of history, which does not necessarily follow the 'laws' of linear chronology that isolate historical events into autonomous experiential compartments.<sup>71</sup>

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Geheimnisse gedeutet wird, welche in den Buchstaben und ihren Kronen verborgen liegen).' (*MI*, 15; see also *MI*, 55).

<sup>70</sup> Robert Gordis, *The Dynamics of Judaism: A Study in Jewish Law* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 80.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr opposes both conceptions of history in a way that is reminiscent of Benjamin's concepts of the 'empty' time of progress and the

As the legend illustrates in a very direct way, the abovementioned solidarity of past, present and future is not even unidirectional, but takes place within a continuum of shared experience. The past is not an abstract construct, revived only by the detached scholarly effort of the present, it has its own claims on and promises for the present or the future.<sup>72</sup> Nor is the past dead, fossilised, and the present the only living reality: that is what Benjamin called the vision of the victorious, the current hegemony whose victory completely eradicates the hopes and dreams of the conquered, thus denying them even the consolation of admitting that they once *did* exist. The Jewish vision of history places a far greater ethical demand on the present, namely

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pregnant, meaningful *Jetztzeit*, or 'Now-time': 'In fact, chronology, a defining feature of the diachronic conception of history, is hardly of significance to the Jewish historical imagination. Thus the rabbis could claim that "there is no late and early in the Torah." (B. *Pesahim*, 6b). The sacred history (and teachings) of the Torah are eternal and not bound by the sequential or linear progression of profane time.' ('History', in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 371-387; p. 372). More thought-provokingly still, Gershom Scholem quotes this passage from B. *Pesahim* in his diary, connecting it to the medial nature of the *Lehre*: "In der Lehre gibt es kein Vorher und kein Nachher". D.h. die Lehre ist ein Medium.' (Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, p. 206). We will discuss the concepts of *Lehre* and *Medium*, as well as the documentary importance of Scholem's diaries, more extensively in the third chapter.

<sup>72</sup> Another Talmudic legend can be cited here to indicate that this 'dialogue' between past and present could also go in the opposite direction. In a discussion on a point of law, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus found himself in a minority position, and called upon three miracles to prove him right, all of which duly occurred. The majority was unmoved by this, and Eliezer called upon a *Bat Kol*, or a heavenly voice, to support him. A voice indeed thundered out: 'Who are you to differ with Rabbi Eliezer, for the law is with him on every point.' But Rabbi Joshua cited Deuteronomy 30:12, stating 'It is not in heaven', meaning that the Torah was given on Sinai, and the majority position was maintained. Rabbi Nathan later met the prophet Elijah and asked what God did in that hour, and Elijah replied: 'He smiled and said "my children have overcome me!"' (B. *Baba Mezi'ah*, 59b; see also Gershom Scholem, 'Offenbarung und Tradition als religiöse Kategorien im Judentum', in *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 90-119; pp. 103-104). This is a not only very strong affirmation of the above-mentioned majority rule in rabbinic law, it also serves to



to recognise the past as its neighbour, as real and tangible as the next man. What makes the legend even more salient is that it physically transposes Moses into the academy of Akiba, thus emphasising the sense of tangibility in this view. It is tempting to draw the analogy between the prophet Moses turning himself around to find that he is surrounded and enveloped by the word of God, from the supreme divine revelation in direct conversation with God to the very modest but no less worthy derivation of this revelation from the minutest fragments of Scripture, and the Torah that needs to be turned over and over to find that it envelops and surrounds the student, that all is in it.<sup>73</sup>

The thread of this hermeneutical credo is inextricably linked to the story of the *tagin*, which can be read as one of the many blueprints of *midrash*. Just as the rabbis believed that all was in it, so they were convinced that, because of the nature of the Torah, all was in its everything. Because it was the word of God in its entirety, nothing in and around the biblical text could possibly be considered incidental, accidental, coincidental. Even those elements that are, strictly speaking, *hors-texte*, such as the essentially meaningless *tagin*, must be presumed to have a certain meaning, perhaps as

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emphasise the fact that the past can also be called upon to answer for and in the present.

<sup>73</sup> The fact that the rabbis sometimes physically identified the sages with Torah scrolls may well make this analogy more than a mere chance concurrence. William Scott Green quotes the Yerushalmi to this effect, saying that 'he who sees a disciple of a sage who has died is like one who sees a Torah scroll that has been burned.' (Y. *Mo'ed Qatan*, 87b). Although the issue of the physicality of the text as well as the scroll and the prophetic and rabbinic identifications with it is quite interesting, involving the oddity of bibliophagy in Ezekiel 2:7-3:3, it would lead us too far at this point (see William Scott Green, 'Romancing the Tome', p. 160).

yet uncovered, simply because they are there. In the words of David Stern: 'Since every verse, indeed, every word in the Torah is divine, it follows that nothing in it, not even a letter or enclitic, is without meaning or purely ornamental. Instead, every word and letter is susceptible to interpretation [...].'<sup>74</sup> As a preliminary circumscription, we can thus say that midrash is the interpretative labour (or game) of showing the truth of Torah even where people did not suspect it to be. The word *midrash* derives from the verb *darash*, meaning 'to seek out', 'to inquire into' or even 'to probe into', which is already used with theological connotations in the Bible itself (for instance in *Ezra*, 7:10 'studying God's law', or *Isa* 34:16 'searching in God's book'<sup>75</sup>). The noun *midrash* itself appears in two later passages in the second book of Chronicles, 13:27 and 24:27, which actually predates the first occurrence of the word *torah* in the Torah itself. This suggests that the phenomenon and practice of midrash grew from amongst the very roots of the Jewish tradition. As is the case with the words *Talmud* (*Torah*), the word *Midrash* refers both to the activity of inquiry and interpretation as well as to its results, the individual *midrashim* as well as the anthologies. In fact, insofar as the redaction of these anthologies frequently spanned several generations or even several centuries, again as in the case of the Talmud, the

<sup>74</sup> David Stern, 'Midrash and the Language of Exegesis: A Study of Vayikra Rabbah, Chapter 1', in *Midrash and Literature*, edited by Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 105-124; p. 110.

<sup>75</sup> According to Molitor, the two middle words of the Bible are *darash darash* (דרש דרש), a fact which has 'mystical signification': '[...] דרש דרש (Darasch Darasch), 3. Mos. 10. 16., sind die beiden mittlern Worte der ganzen Thorah, da das erste zum ersten, das zweite zum zweiten Theil derselben gehört. [note:] Hierin liegen mystische Geheimnisse verborgen.' (MI, 430).

ambiguity inherent in their very name seems quite apt. Deceptively simple on the surface, midrash is so inextricably intertwined with the Jewish tradition itself that, it has been suggested, it 'cannot be precisely defined, but only described.'<sup>76</sup> And this is in fact the reason why we have circumambulated the matter for such a long time.

As William Scott Green remarked in the opening lines of his essay *Romancing the Tome: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and the Theory of Literature*: 'The Talmud has fallen on easy times. No longer a theological menace to be censored and defaced or an abstruse and trivial sophistry to be deprecated and ignored, the Talmud and its interpretive discourse are now in vogue, suddenly legitimate and mainstream.'<sup>77</sup> During the past two or three decades, much has indeed been made of 'rabbinic hermeneutics', with midrash as its flagship, as a forgotten precursor of (post)modern literary theory. Perhaps the most famous exponent of this is the work of Susan Handelman, whose controversial book *The Slayers of Moses* jumped straight in at the deep end, reviving the age-old Hebrew/Greek dichotomy, and declaring rabbinic Judaism as the advocate of a rivalling concept of time (opposed to the Western, linear view), a rivalling concept of meaning (in which a word and its referent seem all but interchangeable) and hence a rivalling concept of reading (in which midrash is said to produce an infinity of meanings from a single verse from the Torah, thus launching the whole

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<sup>76</sup> Günter Stemberger paraphrasing Le Déaut in *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 235.

<sup>77</sup> William Scott Green, *Romancing the Tome*, p. 147.

enterprise into a semiotic free-fall).<sup>78</sup> Whereas some of Handelman's parallels and analogies are certainly thought-provoking, her sweeping conclusions are not at all borne out by her rather scanty evidence, and the fact that she professes to follow the example of midrash herself by merely (gratuitously?) pointing out structural analogies already indicates that she has neither understood midrash nor the structure of the Jewish tradition that underlies it. Without therefore referring directly to Handelman – as there have been numerous others to make similar claims – scholars like Jacob Neusner, David Stern and William Scott Green have rightly cautioned

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<sup>78</sup> Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982). There are far more problems with the book than we have time or space to address right here. The main fallacy of the book, however, is its shamelessly slapdash methodology. Rather than describing the Jewish tradition in its integrity and complexity, Handelman chooses a contrastive approach, opposing 'Hebraism' to 'Hellenism', 'Jewish thought' to 'Greek thought'. With what seems to be an unwarranted arbitrariness, she selects a handful of representatives from each, and has them battle it out. Plato (or rather, Derrida's Plato) and Aristotle are the predictable fighters in the Greek corner, whereas a number of random quotations from Torah and Talmud stand in for the indescribable immensity of the Jewish tradition. Her most glaring methodological error, however, is the fact that she quotes abundantly from Thorleif Boman's *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (translated by Jules L. Moreau (London: SCM Press, 1960)), without making a single mention of James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983). Yet it was the latter book that presented a scathing critique of Boman, if in itself not unproblematic, and thus managed to discredit the validity of the Hebrew-Greek dichotomy as it stood to biblical and theological scholars at large. Handelman's unquestioning use of this very dichotomy as the basis of her argument is therefore enough to reduce her entire book to, admittedly occasionally interesting, essayistic rambling with no real grounding in fact whatsoever. This is also the conclusion of the Jewish scholars mentioned above, who each cite various other factual reasons why her hypothesis as it stands is untenable. See for instance Jacob Neusner, 'The Study of Religion as the Study of Tradition: Judaism', *History of Religions*, 14 (1975), 191-206 and 'A Rabbinic Theory of Language?', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 56 (1988), 762-763. Also David Stern, 'Midrash and Indeterminacy', *Critical Inquiry*, 15/1 (1988), 132-161 and the abovementioned 'Midrash and the Language of Exegesis', as well as the abovementioned essay by William Scott Green, 'Romancing the Tome'.

against making such sweeping statements. As Stern wrote in the introduction of one of his studies on midrash: 'As paradoxical as it may appear, the first duty of a literary approach to midrash, therefore, must be to suspend temporarily more immediate concerns with literature proper and to go over, as it were, to the other side in order to describe the specific language of midrash and the special conditions which created its literary forms and modes of expression.'<sup>79</sup> 'Methode ist Umweg.'

Midrash is in fact at the furthest possible remove from being an informal, non-committal play on multiple meanings, and the fact that it is not would at least in part explain its fascination to a writer like Benjamin. As we mentioned before, midrashim follow the main distinction in the Jewish tradition between *Halakhah* and *Aggadah*, and tend to be either exegetical or homiletical in their basic thrust, although the rigidity of these divisions, as always, should not be overestimated. The halakhic midrashim are predictably exegetical, as their aim, amongst other things, is the derivation of *Halakhah* from the Bible, supplying details which are missing in the Bible, resolving contradictions or providing instructions for the application of a biblical rule. In this enterprise, they sometimes even take issue with the *Mishnah* and the *Tosefta*, providing alternative interpretations or incorporating material that might have been excluded from these two great halakhic works in earlier redactions. Yet since they are conceived as continuous *catena*-like commentaries on the individual books of the Bible,

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<sup>79</sup> David Stern, *Midrash and the Language of Exegesis*, p. 105.

the halakhic midrashim do not exclude the narrative passages and frequently include a great deal of *Aggadah*.<sup>80</sup> Their original redaction and initial expansion – most midrashim enjoyed a rich editorial afterlife, sometimes extending to centuries after their original composition – can therefore usually be dated back to the early Amoraic period, immediately after the redaction of the *Mishnah*. The *Mekhilta* or *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, so named after the author of the first midrash, presumed by tradition to be the original editor, is a midrash on parts of Exodus, as is the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai*. A midrash on Leviticus with a particularly rich afterlife is *Sifra*, a composite work from many different sources citing many different authors. *Sifre Numbers* and *Sifre Deuteronomy* are exegetical midrashim of the eponymous books of the Bible, and *Midrash Tannaim*, or *Mekhilta Deuteronomy* as some prefer to call it, to emphasise its connection to the abovementioned *Mekhilta*, is the last of the great halakhic exegetical midrashim. The exegetical midrash incorporating some of the oldest material is doubtlessly *Bereshith Rabbah*, an almost exclusively aggadic midrash on Genesis (which in itself contains very little *Halakhah*). The redaction of this midrash is probably contemporary to the last stages of the redaction of the Palestinian Talmud. The Palestinian rabbis were by far the most prolific writers of midrashim, which invariably found their way to the Babylonian academies, however, and from there into the Talmud, where

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<sup>80</sup> For a very detailed overview of the various midrashim, halakhic and aggadic, exegetical and homiletical, see Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, pp. 233-359.

they are frequently quoted (*Sanhedrin* 86a, for instance, cites *Sifre*, *Berakhot* 47b and *Hagigah* 3a cite *Sifra* and *Sifre*, ... the list is potentially endless). Another older exegetical midrash which has also been subject to extensive redaction is *Eikhah Rabbati* or *Lamentations Rabbah*.

These latter two midrashim are particularly interesting because they serve to illustrate the point that any rigid distinction between exegetical and homiletical midrashim is bound to fail. Whereas most exegetical midrashim are simply divided into *parashiyot* or paragraphs, following the narrative line of the books they are discussing, both *Bereshith Rabbah* and *Eikhah Rabbati* have proems or *petihot* to introduce each *parashah*.<sup>81</sup> These *petihot* are a typical feature of homiletical midrashim, an elusive phenomenon which, more than simply introducing the sermon, is a miniature midrash in its own right and in fact the most common form of midrashic literature. Unlike the *catena*-like structure of the exegetical midrashim, the homiletical midrashim are structured according to cycles of daily or weekly reading from the Torah, but as no standard cycles emerged until after Geonic times, they continued to vary from place to place for a long time. This is also attested by the different lists of pericopes that have come down to us, called *sedarim* in Palestine and *parashiyot* in Babylonia (the word *parashah* means both paragraph and pericope, pre-emptively blurring the distinction between

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<sup>81</sup> Stemberger points out, however, that the structuring of the exegetical halakhic midrashim in *parashiyot* is mostly a pragmatic decision of later editors, as the text became so adulterated over the centuries that the original structure was lost. This original structure was topical, with a division into tractates, paragraphs and chapters (*massekhtot* or *deburim*, *parashiyot* and *peraqim*) not unlike Mishnah and Talmud (see Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 257 ff.).

exegetical and homiletical midrashim; even the Palestinian name is not entirely unambiguous, as *sedarim* is also used to designate the orders of Mishnah and Talmud). As was the case with the halakhic midrashim, the original structure of the homiletical midrashim was regularly changed to fit another cycle. The largest and most important homiletical midrashim are *Vayikra Rabbah*, a midrash on Leviticus so named by analogy with the older *Bereshith Rabbah*, *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana*, containing homilies for the readings of the festivals and special Sabbaths, and closely related to *Vayikra Rabbah*, and *Pesiqta Rabbati*, a composite work with an extremely complex redactional history. The *Tanhuma-Yelamdenu* is an anthology of homiletical midrashim on the entire Torah, and *Shemot Rabbah*, *Elleh ha-Debarim Rabbah* and *Bemidbar Rabbah*, the three final books of the collection known as *Midrash Rabbah*, are midrashim on Exodus, Deuteronomy and Numbers respectively. The list goes on with scores of smaller midrashim, compendia, late midrashim (including such mystical works as *Sefer Yetsira* and the *Zohar*) and other aggadic works, far too numerous to name. This very brief enumeration, however lengthy it may seem, of the most important midrashim and their position in the Jewish tradition merely serves to indicate that the so-called midrashic literature is in no way second to the Talmudic literature discussed above. Not only do they frequently have the same authors, they also address the same (and of course different) issues, and fragments and even citations of one often find their way into the other. The principles of accumulation, interweaving and exponential complexity in



the Jewish tradition clearly transcend the precarious boundary of genre; indeed, they appear to be what makes this boundary so precarious.

The structure of the individual midrash is illustrated quite well by the composition of a typical homiletical midrash, a dense constellation which, in a sense, mirrors the methodology and perspectival lines of the Jewish tradition as such. The homiletical midrash opens with the abovementioned *petihah*, the proem or preamble to the actual midrash, a name derived from the standard opening formula '*Rabbi X patah*', meaning 'Rabbi X opened (the sermon)' or simply 'Rabbi X preached'. This latter translation, in concurrence with the fact that there are many *petihot* without extant sermons, has lead some scholars to believe that the *petihah* was in fact a sermon in its own right.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, fragmentary though it may seem when seen as a constitutive part of the homiletical midrash, the *petihah* does in fact perform a single movement of thought which is complete in itself. The *petihah* typically opens with a verse from *Ketubim*, or in any case not usually a verse from the book from which the lectionary verse of the Torah reading is taken. The preacher or *darshan*, a word cognate with *midrash* and *darash*, then proceeds to explain the meaning of this verse with the aid of other verses from the Bible, which, other than perhaps having one word or name in common, are not necessarily related to the *petihah* verse in any way. We have emphasised before, with reference to the Talmudic literature, that the Jewish tradition can be seen as an almost spatial, homogeneous and

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<sup>82</sup> Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, pp. 244-245.

simultaneous whole, and this is certainly the most tangible micrological manifestation of that. To the *darshan* and his audience, be they the community at large or students in a rabbinic academy, there is no hierarchical difference between any two verses in the Bible. They are both infused with an equal divinity, and whatever their individual historical, legal or narrative import is must necessarily come second to this fact. As Stemberger phrased it: 'The context [...] is the entire Bible; any of its verses can be related to any other, while the specific intention of an individual book is rarely of interest. One encounters the Bible as an integral whole, which accordingly carries a uniform divine message.'<sup>83</sup> Paradoxically, perhaps, it is this characteristic which lends midrashic hermeneutics their greatest freedom as well as their greatest restraint. The fact that any verse, any word, any root or even any sequence of letters from anywhere in the Bible can be used to back up an argument, encourages students to move freely within the confines of the text, to swim in the Book, so to speak, and let chance correspondences take them to unexpected revelations.<sup>84</sup> But whereas, on the one hand, the minutest similarity is enough to justify a connection, the conclusion drawn from that connection, on the other hand,

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<sup>83</sup> Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 237.

<sup>84</sup> This is a slightly deceptive way of phrasing it, as orthodoxy would have it that there is nothing accidental about these correspondences, as all is already in it (everything is *déjà-là*, to use a modern, but no less traditional phrase). It is probably this technique which inspired the methodology of Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, as it was succinctly formulated in the following quotation: 'Notwendigkeit, während vieler Jahre scharf auf jedes zufällige Zitat, jede flüchtige Erwähnung eines Buchs hinzuhören.' ([N 7, 4], V, 587). If we replace the indefinite article in this passage by the definite article, this quotation could be a description of the attentiveness required by midrashic interpretation.

will predictably be in line with the main tenets of orthodoxy. This is not so much because midrashic hermeneutics cannot beget unorthodox conclusions, but because these conclusions are usually pre-emptively policed. The fascination of midrash, however, as with any other form of theological hermeneutics, lies in the very fact that unorthodox conclusions are indeed possible, as is witnessed by the rich, colourful and sometimes dramatic history of heresy in both the Jewish and the Christian tradition. As Jorge Luis Borges wrote so memorably in his short story 'The Library of Babel', it is enough for a book to be possible to ensure that it will exist.

Midrash, as Stemberger points out, is indeed a literature of compilation and quotation.<sup>85</sup> In both exegetical and homiletical midrashim, it is not unusual to find several different interpretations of the same verse, phrase or even word chained one after the other, separated by the phrase *dabar aher*, 'another interpretation'. This accumulation of interpretations not only serves to pile proof upon proof, or simply to provide alternative readings, their juxtaposition sometimes creates a constellation in which a carefully edited meaning appears to emerge. It is the same desire to create a constellation that animates the *petihah*, which, in a final turn, always links up with the lectionary verse of the sermon proper. This turn is both expected and unexpected, as the congregation knows what is going to happen, but does not know how. The rhetorical and dialectical strategies of some *petihot* indeed suggest that the *darshanim* themselves derived great pleasure from

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<sup>85</sup> Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 240.

leading their audience away from anything resembling a straight line to a conclusion and towards tortuous by-roads and detours, almost consciously delaying their final arrival at the lectionary verse which, when it finally came, must have seemed an intellectual *(dé)tour de force* indeed. One particular strategy the rabbis used in order to create their constellations was the atomisation of the *petihah* verse into smaller units, a strategy which in its turn had a delaying effect, as the full meaning of the verse would only emerge after the several meanings that the *darshan* elicited from its constituent parts had all been woven together. The first midrash of *Bereshith Rabbah* is a fine example of this, as it not only picks apart the *petihah* verse, but quotes the most disparate verses from the rest of the Bible to expand and enrich its meaning. As mentioned before, even though this is strictly speaking an exegetical midrash, it nevertheless opens with a *petihah*:

R. Oshaya commenced [*patah*]: *Then I was by Him, as a nursling* (amon); *and I was daily all delight* (Prov. 8:30). ‘Amon’ means tutor; ‘amon’ means covered; ‘amon’ means hidden; and some say ‘amon’ means great. ‘Amon’ is a tutor, as you read, *As an omen (nurse) carrieth the sucking child* (Num. 11:12). ‘Amon’ means covered, as in the verse, *Ha’emunim (they that were clad – i.e. covered) in scarlet* (Lam. 4:5). ‘Amon’ means hidden, as in the verse, *And he concealed (omen) Hadassah* (Est. 2:7). ‘Amon’ means great, as in the verse, *Art thou better than No-amon* (Nah. 3:8)? which is rendered, *Art thou*

better than Alexandria the Great, that is situate among the rivers? Another interpretation [*dabar aher*]: ‘*amon*’ is workman (*uman*). The Torah declares: “I was the working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.” In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED (1:1), BEGINNING referring to the Torah, as in the verse, *The Lord made me as the beginning of His way* (Prov. 8:22). (*Bereshith Rabbah*, I.1)<sup>86</sup>

The *petihah*-verse is selected from a section of Proverbs in which Wisdom, speaking in the first person, tells of its role in Creation (8:22-31). Halfway through the *petihah*, Oshaya states explicitly what a perceptive reader or hearer may well have suspected already, namely that the speaker here is the Torah itself. The speaker of the verse that is the actual subject of the midrash, set here in capitals, is of course the Torah, and this self-referentiality is exploited by the *darshan*, saying that (IN THE) BEGINNING refers to the Torah. In fact, it refers to the Torah *à coups redoublés*. By uttering the words *Be-Reshith*, IN THE BEGINNING, the Torah not only

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<sup>86</sup> *Genesis*, translated by H. Freedman, 2 vols. (London: Soncino Press, 1939), vols. 1 and 2 of *The Midrash*, edited and translated by H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, 10 vols. (London: Soncino Press, 1939)

invokes the beginning, but also brings it about, both in a mystical and in a very real sense. In the mystical sense, the analogy is voiced by the kaballist doctrine according to which God created the world by uttering his own name, composed of all the letters of the alphabet and all the words of the Torah. In a real sense, the word *Bereshith* invokes, utters the beginning quite simply by actually beginning the text. There is another analogy lurking under the surface which is not made explicit in this midrash, or indeed any other we are aware of, and that is the fact that all five books of the Bible are named after their first word or words, which would make *Bereshith* metonymical not only for Genesis, but also for the entire Torah.

Given the importance attached to this beginning, it may seem odd that the great midrash on Genesis should open with a *petihah* on what to all intents and purposes seems to be a random verse from Proverbs, *in medias res* rather than ‘in the beginning.’ Yet the *petihah*’s standard opening verse, ‘R. Oshaya commenced’, takes us even further forward, somehow suggesting that a humble third-century rabbi was allowed to pre-empt the beginning – as his text commences before the BEGINNING – and the in itself apparently secondary *petihah*-verse, taken from *Ketubim* and not from the Torah, in its turn takes a second place. This could be seen as an exemplary instance of the methodological detour, but there is a good deal more to it. The rabbi’s emphatic presence can be read as an affirmation of the authority of the oral law, almost on a par with the Torah itself, and a confession to the holy duty

of *Talmud Torah*, its recognition as the breath of life of the Torah.<sup>87</sup> The verses from Proverbs, Lamentations, Numbers, Esther and Nahum can come to explain the opening words of the Bible – their own origin, so to speak – because they are already inherent in its very first word. Stern wrote about this phenomenon:

‘a fundamental tendency of midrash [is] the urge to unite the diverse parts of Scripture into a single and seamless whole reflecting the unity of God’s will. This tendency derives directly from the rabbinic ideology of the canonical Torah – Pentateuch, Prophets and Writings – as the inspired word of God, a timeless unity in which *each and every verse is simultaneous with every other, temporally and semantically*; as a result, every verse, no matter how remote, can be seen as a possible source for illuminating the meaning of any other verse.’<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> As we mentioned before, the text of the Torah was originally written without vowels (and even without spaces), and literally had to be voiced in order to come to life, a task which was eventually committed to writing in the *Masorah*. This necessity in its turn mirrors the concept that the law has to be made meaningful and relevant to the present, a demand which automatically entails careful and continuous study. The topos of (divine) breath as bestowing life as well as meaning is a very pervasive one in the Jewish tradition, and would merit a study in its own right. It is therefore quite significant that Benjamin should have chosen this very topos to illustrate the immaterial and purely spiritual relationship of human language and objects: ‘Dieses symbolisches Faktum spricht die Bibel aus, indem sie sagt, daß Gott dem Menschen den Odem einblies: das ist zugleich Leben und Geist und Sprache. – ’ (II, 147). We shall return to this seminal text in the final chapter.

<sup>88</sup> David Stern, ‘Midrash and the Language of Exegesis’, p. 108 (our emphasis).

Echoing a conclusion about the structure of the Talmud, we can again say that the effect of this tendency towards temporal and semantic simultaneity, of which the prolific quotations and cross-reference in midrash are but symptoms, is to create an almost tangible, homogeneous space. It could perhaps be compared to a cumulative hypertext, whereby links do not substitute one another but are superimposed, the first still visible through the second.<sup>89</sup> With another favourite metaphor in modern literary theory, the space of tradition could also be compared to an infinite regress or a *mise-en-abîme*, without the connotation of gradual decline or the hierarchy of superior original and inferior copy. In the terminology borrowed from what seems a radically different system, we might say that the second law of thermodynamics does not apply to theology.

But, following Le Déaut's diagnosis, we will turn to description rather than definition in order to illustrate these fairly awkward analogies. Rabbi Oshaya opens by quoting a verse from Proverbs and highlighting a single word from it, *amon*, which, as the Hebrew Bible is not vocalised, in fact appears as a typical trisyllabic root, אִמֶּן or 'mn. Oshaya then gives four other meanings which this root can take, 'tutor', 'hidden', 'covered' and 'great', and quotes the verses from which he culled these variants, which, by dint of sharing a single root with the *petihah*-verse, are taken to shed light on it. By describing itself as God's nursling, *amon*, the Torah thus also becomes the

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<sup>89</sup> As we mentioned before, the Jewish tradition did not erase old or superseded interpretations from the collective memory, but insisted instead on keeping them all on record (see note 52).



tutor, *omen*, of the Jewish people, having remained hidden, (*ha*)'emun(im), and covered, *omen*, once before Creation and once before Revelation, and it is also great, (*No-*)amon, the Hebrew name for Thebes or Alexandria, outshining the earthly glory of the latter and all the books in its legendary library. Another interpretation: *amon*, the 'great, hidden, covered nursing tutor', is also *uman*, a workman, God's tool in creation. The Torah is all these things at the same time, because all these meanings appear through the root 'mn. This root is the central focus of the midrash, its Archimedean point so to speak, and Oshaya fits the relevant verses around it, allowing these verses to shed light upon the Torah as much as he lets the light to shine through the root from different angles, thereby allowing it to assume different meanings. Oshaya's tool in this midrash is in fact this trisyllabic root, which he wields to perfection, weaving a dense, layered texture through it. The *darshan* turns the root around and around, and at every turn it accumulates another meaning. Only the necessity of eventually coming to the *parashah*-verse brings this exercise to a halt, but if the movement were to be endlessly repeated, the ultimate *Umweg*, it would in fact unfold the whole of tradition. This very belief, this very desire is the vanishing point of the Jewish concept of study, and thus, in a sense, the afterlife of tradition is already contained in the beginning, in its first word, *Be-Reshith*. It is in this very sense that midrash can be seen as a micrological version of the entire Jewish tradition, a compact monad which, however minute, contains the whole development of tradition tucked away into its folds.

Midrash, as we said above, tends to atomise Scripture into ever smaller units. The starting point is usually the verse, which is cut up into phrases or words. These words are reduced to their root, and these roots in their turn are often divided into their constituent letters and recombined into different words. As we have seen, the fact that the scrolls of the Torah contained no vowel points or spaces before the composition of the *Masorah* made this exercise less anomalous than it may seem, but it does not mean that the interpretations derived from this alternative vocalisation simply represent alternative readings of a verse. One particular Talmudic interpretation of *Dt.* 6:8-9, for instance, a verse instructing Jews to wear *tefillin* during prayer and affix a *mezuzah* to their doorpost, is a point in case. The *mezuzah* is a small parchment from the skin of a ritually clean animal which contains the first two paragraphs of the *Shema*, and which is placed in a small case that is fastened to the doorpost.<sup>90</sup> The *tefillin* or phylacteries are small boxes attached to the hand and forehead, also containing such a parchment. Both the *mezuzah* and the *tefillah* scrolls, as well as the handwritten Torah scrolls, were subject to very strict prescriptions regarding its writing, dealt with extensively in chapter three of *Menahoth* and fragmentarily elsewhere. At the point where we enter the discussion, the question is whether writing an open *mem* (n) in the middle of a word instead of the prerequisite closed *mem*

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<sup>90</sup> This *mezuzah* itself contains a beautiful example of the all-pervasive letter-based interpretation: it sometimes has a small opening through which the word *Shaddai* can be seen, written on the back of the parchment. The word *Shaddai*, meaning 'Almighty', is homiletically explained as an acronym for *Shomer delatot Yisra'el*, 'Guardian of the doors of Israel' (see Shalom Paul, 'Mezuzah', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, pp. 460-461).

(ד) invalidates the scroll or not. The Torah verses read: 'Bind them [i.e. the words of the *Shema*] as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them [*U-kethabtam*] on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.' When Rabbi Hisda advocates leniency regarding the form of the letters on the scrolls, 'an objection is raised: *U-kethabtam*: it must be *kethibah tammah* [perfect writing]' (B. *Shabbath*, 103b). By spacing and vocalising the letters in a different way, the phrase acquires a new meaning which is used to shed light on the verse in question and settle the halakhic dispute. It is clear, however, that this is not simply an alternative reading of the same verse. With its alternative vocalisation, the verses would read: 'Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, perfect writing on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.' The fact that this makes little sense illustrates the full bearing of this midrashic atomisation of Scripture, which allows words to be lifted out of their context and inserted into another context without becoming somehow secondary or derivative.

This rabbinic tendency to atomise Scripture, combined with its doctrine of universal quotability, frequently goes beyond the level of the phrase or root, down to the level of the individual letter. With a technique known as *notarikon*, a word is often divided into two or more, or read as an acronym, using each of its letters as the first letter of another word. A fine example of this is God's reassurance to Moses that he will enjoy divine protection from his critics and detractors if he but holds on to the Throne of Glory, 'as it is

said *He maketh him to hold on to the face of his throne, And spreadeth* [PaRSHeZ] *his cloud over him* (Job 26:9), whereon R. Nahman observed: This teaches that the Almighty [SHaddai] spread [PiRash] the lustre [Ziw] of His *Shekhinah* and cast it as a protection over him.' (B. *Shabbath*, 88b). One word is thus expanded into an entire sentence, individual letters unfold into new words, forming a new constellation which typically weaves yet another layer of meaning into the already dense texture. At another point in the Talmud, the same technique is applied to the entire Hebrew alphabet, with a kind of religious primer as its result: '*Alef Beth* [means] learn wisdom [*alef Binah*]; *Gimel Daleth*, show kindness to the poor [*Gemol Dallim*]; ...' (B. *Shabbath*, 104a). This passage is in its turn a perfect example of what we have constantly referred to as a constellation. Leaving out all the editorial additions that make the Talmud legible to a lay audience, the previous example simply reads as '*Alef Beth alef Binah; Gimel Daleth Gemol Dallim.*' The interpretation acquires its full effect exactly because of the immediate juxtaposition of the letters and the words they are taken to represent. The rabbi, so to speak, does not need to step out of the sphere of language, because all is in it. The almost deceptive simplicity that makes these interpretations very *literally* literally self-evident points towards a tendency that is inherent in rabbinic or midrashic interpretation as such, from this simple *notarikon* as a midrash stripped to the bare essentials to the elaborate detours of a *petihah* on its way to the *parashah*-verse. The same tendency is also borne out by the very appearance and the immensity of the

corpus of the Jewish tradition, rich as it is in discussions and elaborations, commentaries and commentaries on commentaries, which it accumulates and weaves into its texture, one on top of the other. This tendency is a marked aversion towards the bare, dogmatic statement, balanced by a predilection towards demonstration, discussion, reasoning, and the construction of arguments. As the fate of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* so eminently illustrates, even the greatest authority brushes this tendency against the grain at his own peril. Only when the evidence and discussion for the halakhic decisions in the *Mishneh Torah* was shown to exist and conscientiously provided could it be assumed into a position of authority. And, as we have seen from the examples from Talmud and Midrash, the ultimate evidence in the Jewish tradition is always textual, in its first and most basic meaning, that is, scriptural. In rabbinic interpretation, the quotation of a verse from the Torah that can be shown to be relevant to the matter at hand will never fail to carry infinitely more weight than any argument brought to it from the outside, however logical, expedient or desirable it may seem. In fact, the best way to illustrate this complex tendency may well be to simply juxtapose it to another quotation, akin to the rabbis in orientation and sparseness of diction:

Methode dieser Arbeit: literarische Montage. Ich habe nichts zu sagen.  
Nur zu zeigen. Ich werde nichts Wertvolles entwenden und mir keine  
geistvollen Formulierungen aneignen. Aber die Lumpen, den Abfall:

die will ich nicht inventarisieren sondern sie auf die einzig mögliche Weise zu ihrem Rechte kommen lassen: sie verwenden.<sup>91</sup>

Both as a method and its results, as a *Gedankenbewegung* and a medium, the basic thrust of midrash is both metonymical and mimetic. One verse is taken to reveal a truth about another verse because they share a phrase or a word. A point is made through proximity, but also through repetition and the revelation of a likeness. Midrash constructs a constellation, with superimpositions and juxtapositions, which hinges on proximity, repetition and likeness. *Alef Beit alef Binah; Gimel Daleth Gemol Dallim*. And recalling Barry Holtz's statement that 'almost all Jewish writing is a kind of midrash'<sup>92</sup>, we can say that by extension, just like the structure of an individual molecule mimics the structure of the snow crystal to which it belongs, what is true for midrash is also true for the Jewish tradition as such. Its blueprint, too, is metonymical and mimetic. The very first word of the Torah creates a chain which links its every single word. Yet this chain does not end with the Bible's last word, as the thread of the written law is picked

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<sup>91</sup> 'Method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to say. Only to show. I will not steal anything valuable or adopt clever phrases. But the rags, the rubbish: these I do not want to itemize but do justice to them in the only possible way: to use them.' ([N 1a, 8], V, 574). A thought-provoking parallel to the interweaving of style and preoccupation in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* can be found in Arthur Cohen's description of the 'classical rabbinic style' with 'its interweaving of various theological motifs and preoccupations, its refusal to separate out high argument from examples drawn from the most mundane events of life, its continuous care for using simple fidelities and loyalty to halakhah as occasions for promising large redemptions.' ('Redemption', in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 761-765; p. 761).

<sup>92</sup> Barry W. Holtz, 'Midrash', p. 186.

up and continued by the oral law, exercising authority by proxy and by proximity. And even within the sphere of the Torah itself, the chain not only folds back on itself but also creates a dense network in which every single word is linked to every other word, every single letter to every other letter. The immense corpus of *Halakhah* and *Aggadah* that is attached to this Torah echoes, mimics, repeats and rehearses both its origin and itself. Oshaya's midrash described the Torah as the architectural plan according to which the world is formed, and just as the Torah thus already traces the structure of everything in this world, every word in the tradition is in some way linked to a word in the Torah. These links, both 'inside' and 'outside' the Torah, defy space and time. By metonymy, they create a space of simultaneity which is meaningful by mimesis, and ultimately, recalling David Stern's metaphor, this metonymy is 'a trope for God.' Because of the divine nature of this continuous metonymy, which was described by the mystics in terms of divine emanations, the mimesis in question is anything but a chance correspondence. One consequence of this credo is that the accumulation of interpretations and meanings we have spoken of should not strictly speaking be seen as a mere addition, but rather a belated revelation of what was already there, an ongoing accomplishment and completion of Revelation. As James Kugel has it: 'Some students of midrash would argue – correctly, I think – that in the midrashic view divine words have an existence independent of circumstance and immediate intention, that, in short, a text is a text, and whatever hidden meaning one is able to reveal in it

through “searching” simply *is there*, part of the divine plan.<sup>93</sup> The accumulation does not so much move outwards as dig inwards. The texture of tradition does not so much stretch and extend as contract and condense. Tradition is in fact at its most inclusive and accumulative where it concentrates on and into its most minute components and unfolds their full potential. Tradition uses its own ‘rags and rubbish’ and does justice to them in the only possible way: by using them, by hallowing them. The rabbinic tendency towards the atomisation of Scripture does not stop at the triconsonantal root, the individual letter, nor even at the individual pen strokes of which a letter is composed, it goes right down to the single *ziyyun* or downward stroke of the apparently a-textual *tagin*.

R. Ashi said, I have observed that scribes who are most particular add a vertical stroke to the roof of the letter *heth* [note: normally ה, the form of this letter in Scrolls to the present day is הׇ], and suspend the [inner] leg of the letter *he* [ה]. They add a vertical stroke to the roof of the letter *heth*, signifying thereby that He lives in the heights of the wor[ld]<sup>94</sup> [note: the letter *heth* is the initial letter of the word הוּא, ‘He

<sup>93</sup> James L. Kugel, ‘Two Introductions to Midrash’, in *Midrash and Literature*, edited by Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 77-103; p. 79.

<sup>94</sup> The original reads: ‘הוּא בְּרֵמֵי שָׁמַיִם’ (our emphasis), ‘he lives in the heights of the *world*’ and not, as the translators of the Soncino edition would have it, ‘דְּבַר’, ‘הוּא בְּרֵמֵי שָׁמַיִם’, ‘he lives in the heights of the *word*’, (I am grateful to Seth Kunin and Edward Ball for drawing my attention to this mistake). Oddly enough, this fairly crucial error of the original translation, published between 1935 and 1952, has been duplicated in the new Hebrew-English edition of the Talmud some fifty years later (tractate *Menahoth* was published in this edition in 1989). With their



lives', and the stroke or tower above indicates that the abode of the living God is on high.]. And they suspend the [inner] leg of the letter *he* for the reason given in the following discussion. For R. Judah the Patriarch asked R. Ammi, What is the meaning of the verse, *Trust ye in the Lord for ever; for in Yah the Lord is an everlasting rock* (Isa. 26:4)? He replied, It implies that if one puts his trust in the Holy One, blessed be He, behold He is unto him as a refuge in this world and in the world to come. This, retorted the other, was my difficulty: why does the verse say *in Yah* and not *Yah*? The reason is as was expounded by R. Judah b. R. Ila'i. [*Yah*, he said,] refers to the two worlds which the Holy One, blessed be He, created, one with the letter *he* and the other with the letter *yod* [י]. Yet I do not know whether the future world was created with the *yod* and this world with the *he*; but since it is written, *These are the generations of the heaven and of the earth when they were created* (Gen, 2:4) [note: the latter half of the verse reads כי ביה' ה' צור עולמים: and this is interpreted as meaning 'for with Yah (i.e. with the letters *yod* and *he*) the Lord formed the worlds.']: read not *be-hibare'am*, when they were created, but *be-he*

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stubborn, or perhaps mindful preservation of this mistake, the editors and translators have opened a literary-theological can of worms which would have been beyond anyone's wildest dreams. They have situated God in the word *wor[l]d*, or in the gap between the world and the Word, which was in the beginning. This seemingly trivial mistake, this philological *minutia*, is in fact the monadological miniature that contains the entire paradox of the existence of God, its logical impossibility and its semantic possibility. This problem, perhaps the most central problem of theological speculation as such, and its relevance to the thought and style of Benjamin's essay *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* will be the subject of our final chapter.

*bera'am*, He created them with the *he*; hence I may say that this world was created with the *he* and the future world with the *yod*. And wherefore was this world created with the *he*? – Because it is like an *exedra* [i.e. closed on three sides and open on the fourth, as is the letter *he* (cfr. B. *Baba Batra*, 25a-b)] and whosoever wishes to go astray may do so. And wherefore is the [left] leg of the *he* suspended? – To indicate that whosoever repents is permitted to re-enter [through the small opening at the side]. And why should he not re-enter by the same [way as he went out]? – Such an opportunity would not arise [note: the repentant sinner requires encouragement and support, so that an additional entrance is made ready for him]; ... (B. *Menahoth*, 29b).

As we reiterated time and again, the differences between Talmudic and Midrashic literature, as well as those between *Halakhah* and *Aggadah*, especially as far as their textual practice is concerned, should never be overstated: the Jewish tradition is fairly consistent and homogeneous in its approach to language and interpretation. However, this does not so much stem from a rabbinic theory of language, the precursor of poststructuralism as Handelman *cum suis* would have it, but rather from a more profound belief – and this word is important, as the eminently *theological* nature of the matters at hand is all too often forgotten – in a certain narrative of creation, election and revelation. In the words of David Stern: ‘The question that must be addressed to such [poststructuralist] approaches defining

Midrash is whether these features – which admittedly do, in a sense, characterize rabbinic interpretation – derive from a genuinely hermeneutical stance or whether they follow from a specific view of the Torah that, though never spelled out explicitly, might be called the virtual ideology of rabbinic thought. According to this ideology, the Torah is not so much a text – it is certainly unlike any other text in human reality – as it is a trope for God, not in the later kabbalist sense in which the very words of the Torah are said to constitute the names of God and to embody his attributes, but in a metonymic fashion, whereby the Torah's being is treated as a kind of figurative extension of God's: just as he is timeless, so the Torah is beyond all temporality; just as his deeds are meaningful, so every word in the Torah is full of significance; and so on.<sup>95</sup> It is thus the ineffable underlying doctrine of the pervasive and literally 'contagious' sanctity of the Torah and the concomitant concepts of its identity with the Divine that results in the abovementioned consistency of the rabbinic approach to language and interpretation. The passage from the Talmudic tractate *Menahoth* quoted above is symptomatic of this doctrine. Although taken from the Talmud, it exhibits nearly all of the characteristics that are generally attributed to midrash. There is the element of discussion, taking place here between three

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<sup>95</sup> David Stern, 'Midrash', in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 613-620; p. 619. This is also the opinion of Jacob Neusner in his rejoinder 'A Rabbinic Theory of Language?' and in a milder form it is also voiced in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's response to it *ad loc. cit.* The reason we emphasise the theological side so strongly is because Benjamin himself can be seen to struggle with it, trying to yoke together such apparently irreconcilable opposites as a religious concept of tradition and a very thoroughly secularised, demythified materialism. The success of this attempt, as we will discuss in the next chapter, is very arguable indeed.

different rabbis of three different generations (Yehudah bar Il'ai, Yehuda ha-Nasi and Ammi), with questions and answers transcending time and space; there is the cross-reference between verses from different parts of the Bible, as a verse from Genesis (2:4) is used to solve what at first sight – or to all intents and purposes, depending on one's perspective – is a textual anomaly in Isaiah (26:4); there is the alternative spacing and vocalisation, as *be-hibare'am* is read as *be-he bera'am*; there is the constellation, in this case a constellation of letters, created by reading כִּיָּה as *with YH* rather than *in Yah*, which is in its turn used as the pivot of the entire passage. And then there is the atomisation, not only of verse and word, but also of individual letters. The contrast between the big gap in the underside of the letter *he* and the small gap between its horizontal stroke and its left leg is read as the proof that it is easy to be lead into temptation, but hard to repent. This interpretation is linked to Scripture only insofar that Yehudah bar Il'ai has proven, with an alternative reading of the verse, that the letter *he* refers to the present world (thereby implying that the letter *yod*, the other letter in the constellation, must needs refer to the future world). From there, the actual conclusion is reached independently of scriptural 'evidence', as the verses in question say nothing about temptation or redemption. Yet, the point is that there is a clearly substantiated reason for every single step of the argument, however slowly it progresses and whatever winding ways it may take.

*Methode ist Umweg.*

The methodical care with which the rabbis establish a discernible, motivated link between every single step of their argument brings us to the final articulation of our own argument. Just as the Jewish tradition sees the Torah as a trope for God, partaking of equal divinity by metonymy, the rabbis saw their own enterprise, expounding the oral law by expanding the written law, as sharing in the same divinity of the latter, by metonymy. For this reason, they took great care in their work never to lose touch, in the most literal sense of the word, with the written law, the Torah. Even though much of rabbinic law is said to be 'like a mountain hanging from a hair,' the sense of a certain tangible connection to revelation, however minute it may seem, appears to be a constant preoccupation. The Talmud can in fact be seen as an attempt to provide these links for the Mishnah, to sew its texture to that of the Torah, so to speak, with an innumerable amount of different threads. This meticulous tracing of the divine genealogy of an argument or interpretation bears witness to a certain conception of language which makes such a notion possible in the first place. As the passage from *Menahoth* indicates, individual letters and even parts of letters are considered to be infused with meaning, to contain sparks of Revelation. This is because the world was created with language, because this language was then given to man, because man used it to name the creation that had been entrusted to him, and because God had used the same language – which is of course Hebrew in all four instances – to reveal the Commandments to Moses. Exactly because there was considered to be such an intimate link between

language, Creation and Revelation, it could simply not occur to the Jewish mind that this language would consist of mere signs, let alone arbitrary signs. The opposite was rather true, as language was endowed with elements of the reality which it had created. And as we have seen time and again, in midrashic and Talmudic literature, words and letters are handled and manipulated as if they are three-dimensional, as if they have a full, physical existence in the semiotically pregnant sphere of the continuous Revelation that is tradition. Such a fullness, we have seen, is even attributed to the tiniest details, the epiphenomena of language, and it is expressed with the eloquence of simplicity by R. Ashi's explanation of the *tagin* placed on top of the letter *heth* by those 'scribes who are most particular': 'They add a vertical stroke to the roof of the letter *heth*, signifying thereby that He lives in the heights of the world.' (B. *Menahoth*, 29b, as quoted above). The crux of this passage, and our entire argument, is located in a single preposition. He lives *in* the heights of the world, signified by a single vertical stroke to a single letter. God should not be searched behind words, or signified by words, or presiding over words, but *in* the words. It is inconceivable that such a belief would not read and treat those words as a valuable, tangible reality. This sense of the tangibility of language and its intimate connection with the divine as well as with the Divine is voiced by Shalom Rosenberg:

The symbolic essence of the Torah is expressed in the statement that the Torah is nothing but a tissue of the names of God. The words of the

Torah are not only linguistic creations consisting of information about God and the world, but also concrete objects – “names.” This identity of symbols and reality leads to an understanding of the sacredness of the Torah as well as to consciousness of its divine status.<sup>96</sup>

It is in fact the name, both with and without a capital *n*, which brings together the concepts of divinity, tangibility and a warranted, non-arbitrary meaning. ‘Die Theorie des Eigennamens’, Benjamin wrote, ‘ist die Theorie von der Grenze der endlichen gegen die unendliche Sprache.’<sup>97</sup> It is also the name as the vanishing point of the divine in Benjamin’s philosophy which makes the latter a genuine heir of the Jewish tradition, if a slightly unorthodox one, who was able to state that Adam and not Plato should be seen as the father of philosophy as well as the father of all people.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Shalom Rosenberg, ‘Revelation’, in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 815-825; p. 817.

<sup>97</sup> ‘The theory of the proper name is the theory of the boundary where finite language touches infinite language.’ (II, 149).

<sup>98</sup> ‘In solcher Haltung aber steht zuletzt nicht Platon, sondern Adam, der Vater der Menschen als Vater der Philosophie, da. Das Adamitische Namengeben ist so weit entfernt Spiel und Willkür zu sein, daß vielmehr gerade in ihm der paradiesische Stand sich als solcher bestätigt, der mit der mitteilenden Bedeutung der Worte noch nicht zu ringen hatte.’ (I, 217).



With the mention of the name, our overview of the Jewish tradition has drawn to an arbitrary close, however paradoxical that may sound. But then again, the paradox may well be the one figure that is eminently suited to describe the Jewish tradition as such. Much as there can be no motivation to close off a discussion of a system that thrives on the accumulation of ever denser layers of meaning, other than the very prosaic limit of space and time – the medium of the Jewish tradition is prose, not poetry – the only valid point at which to begin would have to be an arbitrary one. In our case, it was the convention of the chapter heading, which does not tolerate digression *ad infinitum* (however contrary this may run to the reader's impression of this chapter, and to its author's desire). In the case of the Jewish tradition, however, the ultimate arbitrariness at its inception, the conception, is turned into the ultimate inevitability. One is born into the Jewish tradition, one is always already within. Judaism, like the Law, is by its very nature *déjà-là*. The tangibility of language and the concept of tradition as a three-dimensional space, the two main themes which have served as an undercurrent to this entire chapter and which we have attempted to trace both as cause and effect in talmudic and midrashic literature, are often felt rather than perceived in and by the Jewish tradition itself. Jewish literature, particularly of the last two centuries, has confronted its traditional heritage time and again, sometimes affectionately, sometimes resentfully, but never dispassionately. We need only to recall the words of Micha Joseph Berdyczewski: 'Our eyes are not our own,



our dreams and our thoughts are not our own, our will is not the one implanted in us; everything we were taught long ago, everything has been handed down to us.’<sup>1</sup> From Rabbi ben Bag-Bag to Franz Kafka, tradition is seen as the all into which one is born, the dense and pregnant space in which everything becomes the Text and which completely encapsulates the individual. In a world where the most minute and seemingly trivial action can become a dialogue with the Divine, the immediacy of the text can become a source of life and hope, but tradition can also come to outweigh hope itself. The paradox of being born in eternal hope, charged with a task which one must but cannot hope to finish, the messianic paradox, is woven into the very origins of Judaism: ‘[R. Tarfon] used to say: it is not upon thee to finish the work, but neither art thou a free man so as to refrain therefrom; if thou hast studied much Torah, they give thee much reward, and faithful is thine employer to pay thee the reward of thy labour; and know that the grant of reward unto the righteous is in the time to come.’ (M. *Avot*: II, 16). Or in the words of Gershom Scholem: ‘There is something grand about living in hope, but at the same time there is something profoundly unreal about it.’<sup>2</sup> To Benjamin, as to many Jews of his and later generations, the frustrating yet soothing tangibility of this unreal hope was nowhere expressed more clearly than in the work of Franz Kafka. In his essay *Franz Kafka: zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, Benjamin refers to a ‘Gesprächsfragment [...], das durch Max Brod überliefert wurde’:

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Hartman, ‘Imagination’, in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 451-472, p. 461. See chapter one, note 52.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr, ‘History’, in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, pp. 371-387; p. 380.

‘Ich entsinne mich’, schreibt er, ‘eines Gesprächs mit Kafka, das vom heutigen Europa und dem Verfall der Menschheit ausging. “Wir sind”, so sagte er, “nihilistische Gedanken, Selbstmordgedanken, die in Gottes Kopf aufsteigen.” Mich erinnerte das zuerst an das Weltbild der Gnosis: Gott als böser Demiurg, die Welt sein Sündenfall. “Oh nein”, meinte er, “unsere Welt ist nur eine schlechte Laune Gottes, ein schlechter Tag.” – “So gäbe es außerhalb dieser Erscheinungsform Welt, die wir kennen, Hoffnung?” – Er lächelte: “Oh, Hoffnung genug, unendlich viel Hoffnung – nur nicht für uns.”<sup>3</sup>

The paradox of Kafka’s *Weltbild*, and with it the modern experience of the Jewish tradition, can be described as a comforting cruelty or a homely exile. Ours is not a hopeless world, but this hope does not necessarily exist for us. Kafka’s world, says Benjamin, is populated by ‘unfertige Geschöpfe, Wesen im Nebelstadium’<sup>4</sup>, unfinished creatures or beings in a nebulous stage, and their world appears to be an equally nebulous realm situated somewhere between myth and the law. It is a mythical world ruled by ‘eine düstere Art Gesetz’<sup>5</sup>, and a world of unwritten laws governed by fate.<sup>6</sup> ‘Normal’ human beings, presumably including the reader of Kafka’s novels, cannot bring

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<sup>3</sup> [...] “I remember,” he writes, “a conversation with Kafka about the present state of Europe and the decline of humanity. ‘We are,’ he said, ‘nihilist thoughts, suicidal thoughts, rising up in God’s head.’ I was initially reminded of the gnostic world view: God as the evil demiurge, the world his Fall. ‘Oh no,’ he said, ‘our world is only one of God’s bad moods, one of his off-days.’ – ‘So was there hope outside of this appearance of the world which we know?’ – He smiled: “Oh, hope enough, an endless amount of hope – only not for us.” (II, 414).

<sup>4</sup> (II, 414). Benjamin does not tell us whether the ‘Wesen im Nebelstadium’ inhabiting Kafka’s world are in any way related to the ‘Wolkige Stelle’ in the very centre of Kafka’s parables, or whether they might even be identical.

<sup>5</sup> ‘a dark kind of law’ (II, 415).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Der Mensch kann [die ungeschriebenen Gesetze] ahnungslos überschreiten und so der Sühne verfallen. Aber so unglücklich sie den Ahnungslosen treffen mag, ihr Eintritt ist im Sinne des Rechts nicht Zufall sondern Schicksal, [...]’ (II, 412).

themselves to feel at home in such a world, yet neither do they know why this should be so. Kafka's world itself does not seem 'entstellt', but the creatures who live and thrive in it are: '[...] für die und ihresgleichen, die Unfertigen und Ungeschickten, ist die Hoffnung da.'<sup>7</sup> This is the only way by which the protagonist of Kafka's novels is able to tell that something is out of joint, and this is at the same time the only revelation granted to him just before his death, namely that the problems he has been struggling against, hyperactive helpers or inefficient bureaucrats, are themselves not actually problems, but the symptoms of a problem which is greater than the sum of its components. This problem, this mystery in fact, is not just greater than the sum of its symptoms, it is, paradoxically, not written in the same language, it is not even of the same order. But the *Ungeschickten* do not know, and the protagonist has forgotten.

Forgetfulness is the Kafkaesque condition. The unwritten law, which knows only precedents, convictions and corollaries – but not the actual law itself, does not protect its unwitting subjects against the tyranny of a mythical *Fatum*, it actually originates in a hetaeric *Vorwelt*, 'der schon der Mythos die Erlösung versprochen hat.'<sup>8</sup> The Kafkaesque subject is caught between its atavistic fears of a mythical fate which actually promised to free the subject from its atavistic demon, and an unknown law which claims both seniority and superiority over its mythical opponent. To all intents and purposes, and to all appearances, the law in Kafka's world is actually only the symptom of a law, the cloudy mystery of its substance surrounded by a vast, only slightly more tangible

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<sup>7</sup> '[...] for them and their kind, the unfinished and awkward ones, hope is there.' (II, 415).

<sup>8</sup> '[...], which myth already promised to redeem.' (II, 415).

machinery, which processes, amends, tries and convicts. Benjamin typifies Kafka's pieces as parables, and describes them as follows:

Das hindert nicht, daß seine Stücke nicht gänzlich in die Prosaformen des Abendlandes eingehen und zur Lehre ähnlich wie die Haggadah zur Halacha stehen. Sie sind nicht Gleichnisse und wollen doch auch nicht für sich genommen sein; sie sind derart beschaffen, daß man sie zitieren, zur Erläuterung erzählen kann. Besitzen wir die Lehre aber, die von Kafkas Gleichnissen begleitet und in den Gesten K.'s und den Gebärden seiner Tiere erläutert wird? Sie ist nicht da; wir können höchstens sagen daß dies und jenes auf sie anspielt. Kafka hätte vielleicht gesagt: als ihr Relikt sie überliefert; wir aber können ebensowohl sagen: sie als ihr Vorläufer vorbereitet.<sup>9</sup>

The law, the *Lehre* or *Halacha*, is never there: 'sie ist nicht da.' It is the great absence in the middle of Kafka's work, yet at the same it is omnipresent, weighing down the characters in Kafka's stories, who seem to lead a permanently stooped life, carrying this great unknown on their shoulders, uncertain of its existence but nonetheless fearful of its wrath. As Benjamin wrote in one of his copious notes for the essay: 'Die Lehre als solche ist freilich bei Kafka nirgends ausgesprochen. Man kann nur versuchen, sie aus dem erstaunlichen, aus Furcht gebornen oder furchterweckenden Verhalten der

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<sup>9</sup> 'It does not matter that his pieces do not entirely conform to the forms of western prose and that they relate to the *Lehre* as Aggadah relates to Halakhah. They are not similes and yet do not seek to be taken at face value; they are such that they can be quoted, told by way of explanation. Yet do we have the *Lehre* which is accompanied by Kafka's similes and is explained in the gestures of K. and the gesticulations of his animals? It is not there; at most, we can say that this or that alludes to it. Kafka might have said: hands it down as its relic; but we could just as well say: prepares it as its precursor.' (II, 420).

Leute abzulesen.’<sup>10</sup> In a way, Kafka’s entire work constitutes a painstaking attempt – and the pain is most definitely a symptom of this attempt – to define this absent centre by carefully circumnarrating its nebulous edges. Around the same time, Benjamin’s essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* attempts to do for language what Kafka’s stories attempt to do in language. As Benjamin wrote in the early nineteen-thirties: ‘Es wurde darauf hingewiesen, daß im ganzen Werke Kafkas der Name “Gott” nicht vorkommt. Und nichts ist müßiger als in seiner Erläuterung ihn einzuführen. Wer nicht versteht, was Kafka den Gebrauch dieses Namens verbietet, versteht von ihm keine Zeile.’<sup>11</sup>

If there is a Kafkaesque experience which we could call quintessentially Jewish, it is this paradoxical resignation to continue to read and write, to study, fully aware of the fact that this study will never come close to its object, as the law strictly forbids it. To continue to study the law which, by its very nature, must keep the student from understanding: that, Benjamin writes, is justice: ‘Das Recht, das nicht mehr praktiziert und nur studiert wird, das ist die Pforte der Gerechtigkeit. Die Pforte der Gerechtigkeit ist das Studium.’<sup>12</sup> To this date, the laws which are no longer practised but only studied are the sacrifice laws, which ceased to apply almost two thousand years ago, with the destruction of the Second Temple. The *Lehre*, the name of God, the Temple, these are three

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<sup>10</sup> ‘The *Lehre* as such is never expressed in Kafka’s work. We can only try to read it off from the astonishing behaviour of the people, which is either induced by fear or fearsome in itself.’ (II, 1204).

<sup>11</sup> ‘It has been pointed out that the name “God” does not occur anywhere in the whole of Kafka’s work. And nothing is more otiose than to introduce [the name] in its interpretation. Anybody who does not understand what forbids Kafka from using this name, does not understand a single line of his.’ (II, 1219).

<sup>12</sup> ‘The law which is no longer practised but only studied is the gateway to justice. The gateway to justice is study.’ (II, 437).

unapproachable centres which continue to inspire and command study. For Rabbi Tarfon used to say: 'It is not [incumbent] upon thee to finish the work, but neither art thou a free man so as to [be entitled to] refrain therefrom.' (*M. Avot*: II, 16).

## MOLITOR

## I

Maybe more than any other, the name Franz Joseph Molitor is a mysterious apparition in the work of Walter Benjamin. It appears very abruptly in a letter dated 23 May 1917 and crops up again some six weeks later in a letter dated June 1917. The next and last time the name Molitor is mentioned is on a postcard to Scholem dated 15 March 1919, only to disappear from Benjamin's correspondence as suddenly as it had flashed up less than two years before that. There is something profoundly odd about the desire to hang up a full-fledged reappraisal of Benjamin's writings on three casual mentions of an obscure nineteenth-century writer, whose *magnum atque solum opus* has survived the onslaught of the twentieth century in only four traceable copies.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is to the credit of Benjamin's

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<sup>1</sup> There is one copy of Franz Joseph Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition in dem alten Bunde und ihre Beziehung zur Kirche des neuen Bundes mit vorzüglicher Rücksicht auf die Kabbalah*, to give the work its full majestic title, in the library of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which is Scholem's own copy of the book and thus not accessible for all to see. Another copy is held in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York. The university libraries of München and Tübingen also boast an intact copy of all four volumes, and it is the copy from the latter which has been the basis for my research, thanks only to the dedication and tenacity of professor Roger Woods of the University of Nottingham, who did literally everything within his power to provide me with a copy of this nineteenth-century curiosity. I think it is only fitting that this fact should be acknowledged at the onset of this chapter, which, as this entire thesis, would not have been written without him. Dr. Christoph Schulte of the University of Potsdam, the only author currently writing on Molitor, also has a copy of this rare work in his possession. A sixth copy of the book, the last copy I was able to trace, is presumed to be held by the University Library of the Freie Universität Berlin. I say presumed because the catalogue entry for this work very casually mentions the ominous phrase

keen collector's mind that he actually predicted the future rarity of the book in 1917, as he writes to Scholem : 'Ich habe mich mit dem Besitz des Buches sehr gefreut: übrigens wird es ja, wie der Baader, gemäß der Zeitströmung selten, geschätzt und auch teuer werden, wie ich glaube.'<sup>2</sup> But then again, there is something profoundly odd about these three casual mentions, not in the least because they are so very casual. The first letter, dated 23 May, reads as if it was written on a desk cluttered with papers and open books, as Benjamin gives the impression that he is in the middle of intense and concentrated study. 'Lieber Herr Scholem,' he writes,

'kaum habe ich die Zeit und die äußere Möglichkeit Ihnen zu schreiben gefunden als ich auch sogleich deutlich an einen Anlaß erinnert wurde. Es kamen nämlich heute früh die lange gesuchten sämtlichen Schriften Baaders und weil ich jetzt doch mit einiger Intensität zu studieren hoffe, so will ich was zusammen gehört beieinander haben. Anders kann ich nicht lernen. Und Baader und Molitor gehören so sehr zusammen, daß gleich unter dem ersten was ich gelesen habe zwei wichtige Briefe von

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'*Kriegsverlust möglich*' or 'war loss possible'. It seems fitting, somehow, that this threatened hybrid tradition appears to have borne the brunt of the very physical violence perpetrated in the name of the inexorable progress, whether it be the Nazi book burnings of the nineteen-thirties or the mechanized long-distance destruction of Allied Bomber Command during the Second World War. Sixty years after his death, it has become commonplace to add that the man who observed the teachings of this tradition under threat did not fare much better. It will, and probably should, remain a profound mystery, however, who perished first, the Book or the Man.

<sup>2</sup> 'I am very happy to have the book in my possession; furthermore, like the Baader it will become rare, valued and valuable in the course of time, as I believe.' (GB I, 361). With an almost gematrian twist, this letter can be found in the earlier and considerably shorter edition of Benjamin's letters on page 136 of volume I (*Briefe*, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, 2 vols., second edition (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993)).



ihm an Molitor waren, die unter anderm Wesentliches und Schönes über die Schechinnah sagen.<sup>3</sup>

This does not at all sound like Benjamin had only just become acquainted with the man and his work. On the contrary, the statement that Baader and Molitor are inseparable suggests that Benjamin was already more than just aware of their work, and already knew something of the its substance before he acquired either. The letters from Baader to Molitor of which Benjamin speaks can be found in the penultimate volume of the sixteen-volume edition of Baader's collected writings, and the fact that there are only three such letters in over seven hundred pages of correspondence rather suggests that Benjamin was expressly looking for them, and probably looked up the name Molitor in the index volume.<sup>4</sup> This suspicion is confirmed in a later letter, where Benjamin

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<sup>3</sup> 'Dear mister Scholem, I had hardly found the time and the outside possibility to write you as I was at the same time clearly reminded of a reason. Early this morning, the collected writings of Baader I had sought after for so long arrived, and because I now hope to study with some intensity, I want to have together what belongs together. Otherwise, I am unable to learn. And Baader and Molitor belong together so much, that there were amongst the first things I have read two important letters from him to Molitor, which amongst other things say essential and beautiful things about the Shekhinah.' (GB I, 357). The mystery surrounding Molitor has been perpetuated by the new six-volume edition of the Benjamin's correspondence, as the editors consistently quote the wrong dates and only one of the places of publication: GB I, 359 and II, 20 both have 1828 as the date of the first volume, whereas the earlier edition of the correspondence quoted the correct date, 1827 (*Briefe*, 136). It may be a very innocent editorial oversight, but the fact that the first, correct, date has been 'corrected' suggests that the editors did not have direct access to the work themselves. They also quote Münster as the place of publication, whereas the first volume was actually published in Frankfurt (in 1827).

<sup>4</sup> Baader's collected works are still available in a facsimile edition of the second imprint of the *Sämtliche Werke* of 1857, which is the one Benjamin would have used (Franz Xaver von Baader, *Sämtliche Werke: Systematisch geordnete, durch reiche Erläuterungen von der Hand des Verfassers bedeutend vermehrte, vollständige Ausgabe der gedruckten Schriften samt Nachlaß, Biografie und Briefwechsel*, 16 vols., edited by Franz Hoffmann, Julius Hamberger, Anton Lutterbeck, Emil August von Schaden, Christoph Schlüter and Friedrich von der Osten, second edition (Aalen:

refers back to the passage about the Shekhinah, saying: 'Die Sache steht zerstreut da und es wäre mühsam sie zu exzerpieren.'<sup>5</sup> And all this on the very first day that the books came into his possession. The collected writings of Baader arrived, as the letter tells us, in the early morning of 23 May 1917. We cannot be as precise about the exact date when Benjamin acquired Molitor's book. In the second letter, dated simply June 1917, he writes: 'Der Molitor ist gekommen und das Geld dafür geht heute an Sie ab.'<sup>6</sup>

Thus, we can presume that *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* was in Benjamin's possession by 30 June 1917. However, the same letter contains a sentence which complicates matters somewhat: 'Nur um den Überblick über die Disposition zu haben frage ich Sie nach dem Thema des zweiten Bandes.'<sup>7</sup> Scholem explains the import of this question in a note to this letter, stating that the second volume of the book was no longer available from the publisher at the time. He confirms this in one of his last autobiographical writings, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, the second edition of which was finished in 1982 (which serves to illustrate that we are working with data that are, in the

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Scientia Verlag, 1987)). The letters from Baader to Molitor can be found in vol. 15, pp. 516, 520 and 548-549.

<sup>5</sup> 'The matter is scattered [throughout the book] and it would be laborious to excerpt it.' (GB I, 364). Benjamin refers Scholem to pages 340, 343-349 and 356-357 of the same volume, containing the 'Erste' and 'Zweite Sendschreiben an den Herrn Professor Molitor in Frankfurt' (Baader, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 4, pp. 329-362). The texts are mentioned again in a letter dated 23 December 1917 (GB I, 408). So it does indeed sound like Benjamin fulfilled his intention 'mit einiger Intensität zu studieren'.

<sup>6</sup> 'The Molitor has arrived and the money to pay for it will be sent off to you today.' (GB I, 361). There is a supplementary problem involved in the dating of the letters, in that they are, in both cases, Scholem's estimates. His meticulous and encyclopaedic scholarly accuracy may be the stuff of legends, but it is still no guarantee for certainty. As there is no further circumstantial evidence, however, we have little choice but to accept these datings and conclude that the dates *post quem* and *ante quem* are 23 May and 30 June respectively.

fullest sense of the expression, 'few and far between'). As it contains two other vital pieces of information on the elusive presence of Molitor's work in the intellectual biography of both Scholem and Benjamin, it is worth quoting the paragraph in question:

'Ich las die vier Bände von Franz Joseph Molitors Werk 'Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition', das in Wirklichkeit über die Kabbala handelte. Im Jahre 1916 stellte sich heraus, daß drei der Bände, die bis 1857 erschienen waren, noch beim Verlag für einen Pappenstiel zu kaufen waren, und ich erwarb sie so schnell wie möglich (den fehlenden Band kaufte ich sechs Jahre später bei einer Auktion). Es war mir klar – und auch kaum zu übersehen –, daß die christologischen Umdeutungen diesen Autors, eines Schülers Schellings und Baaders, ganz verfehlt waren, aber er hatte doch mehr von der Sache verstanden als seiner zeitgenössischen judaistischen Koryphäen.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'Only to have an overview of the plan [of the book], I ask you what the theme of the second volume is.' (GB I, 361).

<sup>8</sup> 'I read the four volumes of Franz Joseph Molitor's work *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, which actually dealt with the Kabbalah. In 1916, it became clear that three of the volumes, which had appeared up to 1857, could still be bought for a song from the publisher, and I acquired them as soon as possible (I bought the missing volume at an auction six years later). It was obvious to me – and could hardly be overlooked – that the christological reinterpretations of the author, a student of Schelling and Baader, were entirely misguided, yet he still showed more understanding of the matter than the eminent authorities on Judaica at the time.' (Gershom Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem: Jugenderinnerungen*, translated by Michael Brocke and Andrea Schatz, second edition (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), p. 132). The year 1916 is confirmed as the year of acquisition on the fly-leaf of Scholem's own copy of Molitor's book, which is currently in the Hebrew Library of Jerusalem, in which he had written (in Hebrew): 'These volumes were already in my collection in 1916, when I bought the book in Berlin.' (quoted in "Die Buchstaben haben... ihre Wurzeln oben.": Scholem und Molitor', in *Kabbala und Romantik*, edited

Thus we are forced to conclude that Benjamin only had volumes one, three and four in his possession in 1917, and possibly might not have had direct access to a copy of the second volume before Scholem bought his at an auction in 1922. However, there does remain the possibility that Benjamin consulted the volume missing from his own collection in any of the municipal or university libraries in one of the many towns where he lived at the time. In the letter of 23 May 1917, he states his intention to do so in case Scholem fails to send him a copy of the book.<sup>9</sup> Between 1917 and 1922, the most important stations of Benjamin's *Wanderzüge* were Munich, Bern and Berlin, amongst many towns of lesser renown. He might thus have consulted the missing volume in any of these cities, but we have no information either to confirm or to deny this. The fact that he returned to Berlin in 1920 is potentially very interesting, as we know that the library of the University of Berlin held a copy of the book at least up until 1933 (on 10 May of that year, the first of the infamous book burnings took place, and it is quite conceivable that a book such as Molitor's might have fallen prey to this 'bibliocaust').

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by Eveline Goodman-Thau, Gerd Mattenklot and Christoph Schulte (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994), pp. 145-164; p. 159).

<sup>9</sup> 'Haben sie es nicht erhalten, so werde ich mich auf der münchener Universitätsbibliothek darum bemühen.' (GB I, 357). As we mentioned in note 1 of this chapter, the 'münchener Universitätsbibliothek' still has a copy of *Philosophie der Geschichte* to this day, so it is quite possible that Benjamin did indeed consult the book before acquiring a copy for himself. It is impossible to say exactly when he would have done so, but we do know from his correspondence that in November and December of 1916, when he was writing *Über Sprache* and sending excited letters to Scholem, Benjamin was in fact in München, of all places. Unfortunately, the loan records of the University Library of München do not date back as far as 1916, so the question as to whether Benjamin did indeed consult *Philosophie der Geschichte* there, as he obviously intended, must remain open.

Yet in the quotation from *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, Scholem also tells us that he had been reading all four volumes of *Philosophie der Geschichte* before he finally bought them in 1916 and 1922.<sup>10</sup> This is confirmed in Scholem's seminal biography of his friendship with Benjamin, entitled *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, which speaks in similarly respectful terms of Molitor's work (this is in itself striking, especially in view of Scholem's more than simply ambiguous attitudes towards Christianity, especially after 1945). In *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Scholem presents the same version of the facts of the book's availability as *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem* and the notes to both editions of Benjamin's collected correspondence, but, most crucially, he dates his own engagement with the book back to the beginning of 1915:

Damals begann auch sein [Benjamins] Interesse an Franz von Baader, auf den er in München durch Max Pulver gekommen war, und für Franz Joseph Molitor, einen Schüler Schellings und Baaders, der als einziger ernstzunehmender philosophischer Autor in deutscher Sprache fünfundvierzig Jahre an das Studium der Kabbala gewendet und zwischen 1827 und 1857 vier Bände als Einleitung einer von ihm geplanten Darstellung der Kabbala anonym veröffentlicht hatte, unter

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<sup>10</sup> In a letter to Harry Heyman dated 12 November 1916, Scholem speaks very highly of Molitor, saying that his book has greatly improved his knowledge of Judaism and that he 'infinitely regrets' not owning it: '[...] die "Philosophie der Geschichte oder über Tradition" [sic] von Molitor, ein großes 4bändiges Werk über jüdische Mystik von einem katholischen Kabbalisten, das mich sehr gefördert hat, und das nicht zu besitzen ich unendlich bedauere. Allein auf 700 Seiten behandelt er im 3. Bande die Lehre vom Unreinheit im Judentum, der wichtigste Teil seiner Darstellung. Über dieses Buch habe ich viele Gedanken, darunter auch richtige.' (Gershom Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. 1, p. 58).

dem denkwürdigen Titel : *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*. Obwohl dieses Werk der Kabbala durchaus grundlos eine christologische Wendung zu geben suchte – der Autor gehörte zum liberalen Flügel der deutschen Katholiken –, ist das Buch noch immer beachtenswert. Ich hatte es Anfang 1915 zu lesen begonnen und kam in unseren Gesprächen mehrfach darauf zu sprechen, erzählte ihm auch, daß drei Bände des Werkes noch immer beim Verleger zu haben seien. Es waren dies unsere ersten Gespräche über Kabbala, von deren Quellenstudium ich damals noch weit entfernt war, mich aber doch schon von dieser Welt dunkel angezogen fühlte.<sup>11</sup>

In the same book, Scholem tells us that their first conversation took place on 21 July 1915, a conversation which Benjamin begun '*in medias res*,' talking about the essence of the historical process, the philosophy of history, socialism and Zionism, amongst other things.<sup>12</sup> This intense level of intellectual activity would continue to characterize their conversations and correspondence until

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<sup>11</sup> 'At that time he also began to become interested in Franz von Baader, whose work he had become acquainted with through Max Pulver in Munich, and in Franz Joseph Molitor, a student of Schelling and Baader, who was the only serious philosophical author to have dedicated forty-five years to the study of the Kabbalah and who had anonymously published four volumes between 1827 and 1857 as an introduction to a planned account of the Kabbalah, with the memorable title *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*. Even though this work quite groundlessly attempted to give the Kabbalah a christological turn – the author belonged to the liberal wing of the German Catholics –, the book is still noteworthy. I had started to read it at the beginning of 1915 and talked about it repeatedly in our conversations, and also told him that three volumes of the work were still available from the publisher. These were our first conversations about Kabbalah, and back then I was still a long way away from the study of its origins, even though I already felt a dark attraction from its world.' (Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 53).

<sup>12</sup> Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 13.

Benjamin's death in 1940. It allows us to conclude not only that Benjamin could have known about Molitor's work as early as July 1915, from which date Scholem says they spoke about the book 'repeatedly', but also that it would have been highly unlikely, bearing in mind the sheer level of their conversations, that Benjamin would have remained unaware of the substance of the book before he decided to buy a copy in May 1917 (again, the reason why he bought the book was probably because he *was* aware of its content to a certain extent). This suspicion is confirmed by the aforementioned letters written around that time, in which he speaks about Molitor in a very matter-of-fact way, suggesting that he was at least conversant with the gist of the author's work and his relationship to Baader and the Jewish tradition. The reason why it is so important to establish these dates is because it allows us to presuppose the possibility, or at least stops us from dismissing the possibility, of an actual and traceable Jewish influence on Benjamin's crucial essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, which he wrote in early November 1916. As we shall see later, this is one of the moot points among Benjamin scholars.

Scholem's letters and diaries, which have been published in the course of the past five years, also provide us with valuable information of both his and Benjamin's intellectual preoccupations during these early years. As Benjamin wrote in a letter to Scholem of 11 November 1916, in which he mentions the language essay as a work in progress, their discussions and ensuing correspondence appear to have revolved around the questions of language and truth in relation to Judaism and mathematics. Benjamin says that he started

writing what became *Über Sprache* in response to certain questions put to him by Scholem, some of which he felt unable to answer, and states that he would no doubt benefit greatly from the latter's opinion.<sup>13</sup> Scholem's diary entries around that time suggest that Benjamin's feeling was correct, as the former is writing about these matters with the greatest knowledge and eloquence. Moreover, it is exactly one month before Benjamin's letter that Molitor is mentioned for the first time, in a diary entry dated 11 October 1916. Again, the nature of this casual note appears to suggest, as Scholem confirms in his autobiographical writings, that Benjamin had been reading the book for quite a while. At the end of a discussion of the Kabbalist doctrine of the tripartite soul, consisting of *ruach*, *nefesh* and *neshama* – a subject to which Molitor devotes a great deal of attention in volumes II and III – Scholem simply adds: 'In der Gottheit als dem allerrealsten Sein gibt es keine Möglichkeit. Siehe Molitor II,

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<sup>13</sup> 'Vor einer Woche begann ich einen Brief an Sie der bei achtzehn Seiten Länge abschloß. Es war der Versuch einige aus der nicht geringen Anzahl der Fragen die Sie mir vorgelegt haben im Zusammenhang zu beantworten. Indessen mußte ich mich entschließen um den Gegenstand genauer zu fassen, ihn zu einer kleinen Abhandlung umzuarbeiten mit deren Reinschrift ich jetzt beschäftigt bin. In ihr ist es mir nicht möglich gewesen auf Mathematik und Sprache, d.h. Mathematik und Denken, Mathematik und Zion einzugehen weil meine Gedanken über diese unendlich schwere Thema noch ganz unfertig sind. / Im übrigen aber versuche ich in dieser Arbeit mich mit dem Wesen der Sprache auseinander zu setzen und zwar – soweit ich es verstehe: in immanenter Beziehung auf das Judentum und mit Beziehung auf die ersten Kapitel der Genesis. Ihr Urteil über diese Gedanken werde ich in der sicheren Hoffnung durch dasselbe sehr gefördert zu werden erwarten.' (GB I, 343). Unfortunately, apart from very few exceptions, Scholem's letters to Benjamin have not been preserved, which means that we do not know directly which questions Benjamin was attempting to answer. However, Scholem's diary entries around that time may give us a rough notion of what Benjamin and himself were discussing at the time, and it is clear from these diary entries that the questions of language, tradition, truth and totality were very much on both men's minds. As we will see in this chapter and the next, these discussions were the direct catalyst for *Über Sprache*, and the name Molitor was a very powerful presence in them.



§ 94.’<sup>14</sup> Five days later, another diary entry reads: ‘Im Molitor Band III, § 620 finde ich endlich, daß die Stelle: Am Orte, wo die Umkehrenden stehen, die Gerechten nicht stehen können, in Berachot 34b steht [...]’.<sup>15</sup> These diary entries, and there are several others from around the same time, suggest that Scholem was now not just reading *Philosophie der Geschichte*, but actually scrutinizing it, searching for sources, quotations and passages. It is quite meaningful that he should have been doing this around the exact time when Benjamin’s work took a ‘Jewish turn’, finally to use this dangerous term, and as we shall see in the next chapter, Scholem’s reports on their discussions mention the very same questions about language, tradition and totality, summarised in the concept of the *Lehre*, that we have addressed in the context of Judaism in the previous chapter.

This fine-toothed philology is of course essential in determining the possible influence of Molitor’s book on Benjamin’s work, which has no doubt been underestimated by scholars up to this date, probably not because of any great prejudice against it, but because it is so very hard to trace, and, with its length approaching two thousand pages of the densest German, hardly an inviting read. But it is also important because it can lead us to suspect that those scholars who have dismissed the influence of Molitor as negligible or irrelevant have not actually read, consulted or even seen the work themselves. Thus, up to this date, the reasons given for this dismissal have been entirely

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<sup>14</sup> ‘In the Godhead as the most real being there is no possibility. See Molitor II, § 94.’ (Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. I, p. 404).

<sup>15</sup> ‘In Molitor volume 3, § 620 I finally found that the passage: the just cannot stand where the repentant [*lit.* ‘those who turn around’] stand, stands in Berakhot 34b [...]’ (Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. I, p. 408).

circumstantial. The question of the book's actual contents has never been critically addressed, all four volumes of it have always been dismissed as being merely 'about the Kabbalah.' It would amount to much the same if we were to refuse to read the *Passagen-Werk* because it is merely 'about Paris' (because the majority of its quotations are indeed linked to that city in some way, but these links are in fact the whole point). Let us take for example Winfried Menninghaus's book *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*. This book is a remarkable achievement in many ways, if perhaps slightly outdated on certain topics now, some twenty years after it was first published (Menninghaus disregarded *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, for instance, and most of the documentary evidence we are using here was simply not available to him), and it is particularly eloquent on the influence of the early German Romantics on Benjamin (Schlegel, Humboldt and Hamann, amongst others). Yet on the subject of the importance of the Jewish tradition to Benjamin's theory of language, Menninghaus's reasoning can hardly be accused of great subtlety. To begin with, he states that 'Versuche einer Annäherung an Benjamins Sprachphilosophie [...] darin [überein]stimmen, daß sie die Frage nach deren Traditionshorizont gleichsetzen mit der Frage nach Benjamins Kenntnis der jüdischen Kabbala',<sup>16</sup> thus essentially reducing the Jewish tradition to what we have shown in the previous chapter was actually only an historical and textual subdivision of a vast corpus of texts. The only reason he

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<sup>16</sup> '[...] attempts to approach Benjamin's philosophy of language agree insofar as they equate the question of its horizon of tradition with the question of Benjamin's knowledge of the Kabbalah [...].' (Winfried Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), p. 189). Another unfortunate

gives to justify this is the fact that Scholem would later become the leading light on Jewish mysticism in general and the Kabbalah in particular.

Interestingly enough, on the same page Menninghaus says that even Scholem's presence in 1915 and 1916 could not have guaranteed a Jewish influence on Benjamin's *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (the aforementioned moot point of Benjamin studies), as 'noch nicht einmal Scholem mit der Erforschung der Kabbala begonnen hatte.'<sup>17</sup> To corroborate this point, Menninghaus refers to the passage from *Geschichte einer Freundschaft* which we quoted above. This passage, however, does not say that Scholem had not yet begun to study the Kabbalah as such (*Erforschung der Kabbala* are the exact words Menninghaus uses), it only states that he was still some way from studying the Kabbalah's sources (*deren Quellenstudium*). Scholem says in the same passage that he had begun to read Molitor's book, which he described in 1975 as '*noch immer beachtenswert*', as early as 1915. If, as Menninghaus himself writes, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* is indeed a book about the Kabbalah, does that then not mean that Scholem had begun to study the Kabbalah, even though he did not instantly rocket to the lonely heights of the expert who wrote *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* in 1941?<sup>18</sup> It does seem that Menninghaus wants to have it

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mistake in Menninghaus's claim that Benjamin continued the linguistic traditions of Hamann and Humboldt is discussed extensively in note 63 of this chapter.

<sup>17</sup> '[...] not even Scholem had begun his study of the Kabbalah.' (Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, p. 189).

<sup>18</sup> This view is actually confirmed by Scholem himself, in a letter to Salman Schocken (the man who would publish *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*) dated 29 October 1937, in which Scholem acknowledges the importance of *Philosophie der Geschichte* in laudatory terms: 'Damals aber war Molitors seltsame Buch "Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition", das mir bei Poppelauer in die Hand gefallen war, von faszinierender Wirkung auf mich. So unfundiert es im Historischen auch sein

both ways, denying the relevance of the book to Benjamin on the grounds that it is only about the Kabbalah, yet also denying that Scholem had studied this very Kabbalah despite the fact that he had, for the past two years, been reading a book which is only about the Kabbalah. Furthermore, in *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, Scholem writes that his interest in the Kabbalah was already awakened in 1915, when he not only read and annotated books about the Kabbalah, and started to fill 'numerous notebooks with excerpts, translations and commentaries on the Kabbalah', but even bought all three volumes of the *Zohar* in Aramaic, which he started to study at home, as his Talmud teacher, Dr. Bleichrode, did not understand quotations from it.<sup>19</sup> The only thing

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mochte, es gab eine Adresse an wo das geheime Leben des Judentums, dem ich meinen Meditationen nachhing, einmal gewohnt zu haben schien.' (Gershom Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. I, p. 471).

<sup>19</sup> 'Schon im Jahre 1915 regte sich mein Interesse für die Kabbala, und ich besitze noch meine ersten Aufzeichnungen über die Bücher, die ich damals las, und die Betrachtungen, die ich dazu anstellte. [...] Im Jahre 1915 kaufte ich auch die drei Bände des Sohar, von denen ich noch nicht viel verstand. [...] Ich versuchte einmal, Dr. Bleichrode zu veranlassen, mit einigen von uns R. Elia de Vidas' "*Reschith Chochma*", einen berühmten Traktat über kabbalistischen Ethik aus dem Safed des 16. Jahrhunderts zu lesen. Nach einigen Stunden sagte er: "Kinderlach, wir müssen es aufgeben. Ich verstehe die Zitate aus dem Sohar [deren das Buch voll war] nicht und kann euch die Sache nicht richtig erklären." So mußte ich mich selber in diese Quellen einlesen suchen. [...] Ich kaufte mich wie erwähnt eine (russische) Ausgabe des Sohar und versuchte mein Glück. [...] Zwischen 1915 und 1918 habe ich nicht wenige Hefte mit Exzerpten, Übersetzungen und Betrachtungen zur Kabbalah vollgeschrieben, die noch weit von wissenschaftlicher Bemühung und Erkenntnis entfernt waren.' (Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, pp. 130, 131 and 132). One of the books which he read in 1915 was Ahron Marcus's *Chassidismus* (1901), which he described as 'recht merkwürdig: es vermittelte breites Wissen und zum Teil sehr eigenwillige Informationen, war mit zahlreichen Kapiteln durchsetzt, die keineswegs dort hingehören, und produzierte viele große Neuigkeiten zur Kabbalah und ihrer Literatur, die zumeist, wie mir erst Jahre später dämmerte, jeder Grundlage entbehrten. Dennoch war das Buch energisch und nicht ohne Einsicht geschrieben, [...].' (p. 130). This description is remarkably similar to Scholem's evaluation of Molitor's book, whose achievement he continued to respect. The information Scholem provides about these early years in *Geschichte einer Freundschaft* and *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem* is confirmed by the diary entries and letters he wrote at the time, but we have neither time nor space to give a full account of these (even though they would no doubt lead to yet another reassessment of Scholem's influence on Benjamin's work at the time).

Scholem is saying is that his knowledge of the sources of the Kabbalah in these early years could not be called scientific; in other words, that he was not yet the great expert and innovator he would later become. Yet as these quotations show, it does not matter whether Scholem's knowledge of the Jewish tradition at the time was factually correct to present-day standards, the point is that he did have a more than decent knowledge of the state of the debate in Judaica at the time, and it is this knowledge which he would have communicated to Benjamin.

Furthermore, by reducing the question of Jewish influences to a question of factual knowledge of the sources of the Kabbalah, which he subsequently denies to Scholem at that time, Menninghaus not only performs an objectionable reduction of the entire Jewish tradition, he also trivialises Scholem's already considerable conversancy with this tradition. It is not even necessary to be familiar with the biographical details surrounding Scholem's education to know that even the knowledge of the very existence of the Kabbalah at the time, let alone of its nature, cannot simply have emerged out of the blue in 1917. As Scholem tells us in both *Geschichte einer Freundschaft* and *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, he had been very vigorously engaged in the study of the Hebrew language and the biblical and post-biblical sources of Judaism from as early as 1913. Around that time, he started to attend advanced classes in a Yeshivah close to his Berlin home on the Mishnah, the Talmud, and even Rashi's commentaries to them.<sup>20</sup> Scholem proved to have been an extremely enthusiastic and avid learner, studying the language for ten to fifteen

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<sup>20</sup> Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, p. 52.

hours a week and studying the Talmud for another five to six hours a week, figures which impressed Benjamin when he told him.<sup>21</sup> And even though the name Scholem has now become almost exclusively associated with the Kabbalah, it appears to have been his first confrontation with the source texts of 'mainstream' Judaism which made the most lasting impression on him:

Wenn ich mich frage, ob ich eigentlich je das hatte, was man in meiner Beziehung zum und Erfahrung des Jüdischen ein Erlebnis nennen dürfte, so weiß ich nur eine Antwort. Das war die Erschütterung im Frühjahr 1913, als ich an einem Aprilsonntag bei Bleichrode die erste Seite des Talmud im Original lesen lernte ("Von wann an liest man das Schema' am Abend?" und Raschis Kommentar dazu), und später, am gleichen Tag, die Erklärung Raschis [des größten aller jüdischen Kommentatoren] zu den ersten Versen des Genesis. Es war meine erste traditionelle und direkte Begegnung nicht mit der Bibel, sondern mit jüdischer Substanz in der Tradition. Jedenfalls hat diese Begegnung meine Bewunderung für das Jüdische und meine Hinneigung dazu mehr als jede andere, die ich dann später auf diesem Gebiet gehabt habe, bestimmt.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> 'When I ask myself if I ever had something in my relationship to, and experience of, the Jewish that could be called a formative experience, I only know one answer. It was the shock in the Spring of 1913, when on a Sunday in April I learned to read the first page of the Talmud in the original with Bleichrode ("From when does one read the Shema at night?" and Rashi's commentary to this), and later, on the same day, the explanation of Rashi [the greatest of all Jewish commentators] accompanying the first verses of Genesis. It was my first traditional and direct encounter not with the Bible, but with Jewish substance within the tradition. In any case, this encounter has

These were the things about which Benjamin and Scholem talked most at the time, not about the ultimately very specialist field of kabbalist language mysticism. After all, Scholem did not know he was going to become the foremost authority on Jewish mysticism of the twentieth century in 1915, so we can safely assume that at the time he felt no obligation towards future scholars to talk only about the Kabbalah. Yet this is the gist of Menninghaus's argument when he says that any Jewish influence on Benjamin's work must have come from the Kabbalah, because Scholem was to become an expert in this field some ten years after they met.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Scholem told Benjamin about his Talmud studies, and Benjamin wanted to know what they studied and how this form of study went about itself.<sup>24</sup> During these years, Scholem appears to have become Benjamin's sounding board for all things Jewish. In fact, the self-confessedly assimilated and secularised Benjamin did not attempt to perform a similar operation on Scholem, but actually encouraged him to venture further into the realms of Judaism and deepen their mutual understanding of it:

Benjamin hat diese Bindung, so paradox das bei seiner ziemlich totalen Unwissenheit in jüdischen Dingen scheinen möchte, niemals in Frage gestellt. Er war weit davon entfernt, mich von diesen Neigungen abbringen zu wollen, fand sie im Gegenteil sehr interessant, ja tendierte dazu, mich darin noch, wenn man so sagen dürfte, zu bestärken, da ich

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determined my admiration of the Jewish and my inclination towards it more than any other which I later had in this area.' (Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, p. 53).

<sup>23</sup> Menninghaus, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, p. 189.

seine Adresse für alle Fragen auf diesem Gebiet würde. [...] Philosophische und literarische Interessen verbanden uns, aber die Fragen, die er, wenn ich – gleich bei unseren ersten Begegnungen – von Jüdischen erzählte, in seinen gänzlich originellen und unerwarteten Variierungen und Formulierungen an mich stellte, regten mich außerordentlich an und erzwangen bei mir eine viel intensivere Konzentration, als ich sie im Kreise meiner zionistischen Jugendfreunde aufzubringen hatte.<sup>25</sup>

This passage again indicates, as we have pointed out above, that the level of their conversations was considered by both to be quite intensive, with the (relative) amateur posing questions to the (relative) expert which not only excited the latter, but also demanded a more intensive level of concentration from him. This in itself, as we mentioned in the first chapter, is a characteristic of the traditional Jewish way of studying Torah and Talmud, whereby the distinction between teacher and pupil, between *Lehrer* and *Lehrende*, gradually

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<sup>24</sup> 'Er wollte wissen, wie das vor sich geht, und ich bemühte mich, ihm zu erklären, was mich an dieser Lektüre talmudischer Diskussionen so faszinierte.' (Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 24).

<sup>25</sup> 'Benjamin never questioned this attachment [to Judaism], however paradoxical this may appear in view of his all but total ignorance of things Jewish. Far from wanting to distract me from these tendencies, he found them on the contrary very interesting, and even tended to encourage me in pursuing them, so to speak, as I became the addressee for all his questions on this subject. [...] We were united by a shared interest in philosophy and literature, but the questions he asked me in his completely original and unexpected variations and formulations, when I told him of things Jewish – as early as our first meetings – excited me very much and demanded a far more intensive concentration from me than I had to muster in the company of the Zionist friends of my youth.' (Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, p. 75).



dissolves into the sphere of learning, into the ‘continuum of the *Lehre*,’<sup>26</sup> a concept of which Benjamin became particularly fond. At a very early stage of their friendship, when they had only known each other for a couple of weeks, Benjamin already seemed to have become fascinated by the study of Talmudic discussions and about the nature and the dynamics of the Jewish tradition. Scholem told him how halakhic discussions take shape and how teachers tended to approach any given matter from a number of different angles, as we discussed in the previous chapter. He also praised his aforementioned teacher, Dr. Bleichrode, ‘einen sehr frommen und ganz zurückgezogen lebenden und bescheidenen Rabbiner [...], der sich großartig darauf verstand, eine Seite Talmud zu erklären und überhaupt Jüdisches zu tradieren.’ Whereupon Benjamin sighed and said : ‘Ach, wenn es das doch in der Philosophie gäbe.’<sup>27</sup> Some three years later, between November 1917 and March 1918, he would reiterate this sigh in a more systematised form, in the essay *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, which we will discuss at length in the next chapter. Here, however, it may serve to illustrate the fact that Benjamin’s

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<sup>26</sup> Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, pp. 53-55. It was the teacher’s task to teach the pupil how to learn (‘*lernen zu lehren*’ as Scholem phrases it), an autotelic activity which was in essence multi-dialogical, occurring not only in the dialogue between teachers and pupils and between pupils amongst each other, but also between the students (teachers or pupils) and the text. These characteristics, which we discussed at length in the previous chapter, fascinated both Scholem and Benjamin.

<sup>27</sup> ‘[...] a very pious, secluded and modest Rabbi [...], who was able in the most splendid way to explain a page of the Talmud and to hand down “the Jewish” as such. Benjamin sighed and said: “Oh, if only something like this existed in philosophy too.”’ (Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 24). ‘*Jüdisches zu tradieren*’ is a particularly German turn of phrase, with a nominalised adjective not predicated by an article, a structure which does not exist in English. Literally, it would translate as ‘to hand down Jewish(ness)’, which suggests an almost physical reality of Jewishness in (the German) language. This kind of ‘meta-semantic’ content, something which is communicated *in* language but not *by* language is quite similar to Benjamin’s

interest in the Jewish tradition was not a mere passing fad. Nor was his reliance on Molitor in this respect either incidental or negligible. In fact, in March 1919, a year after completing the *Programm* and two years after buying the book, Benjamin writes a letter to Scholem in which he asks when he will return the copy of the Molitor, which Benjamin had lent to him, according to the editors.<sup>28</sup> This is the last time Molitor was mentioned in any of Benjamin's surviving letters. Lonitz and Gödde, the editors of the new six-volume edition of Benjamin's correspondence, point out that this new edition, replacing the old two-volume edition of 1966, was more than justified in view of the many letters that have been discovered since then (and in order to restore some of the passages in the already available letters which Scholem and Adorno had censored in their edition). The first edition was culled from 'etwa 600 Briefe', the second edition presents about 1270 letters, more than double the amount, none of them censored or abridged.<sup>29</sup> They also admit that more letters are being discovered regularly, mostly from private collections, so the possibility that Benjamin wrote about Molitor to other people than Scholem (to whom he presumably primarily talked about Molitor, as suggested by the tone of the letters and confirmed in *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*) cannot be excluded.

This final mention of Molitor in the letter dated 15 March 1919, asking Scholem when he will return the book, can hardly be used to indicate that the book was performing a mere *acte de présence* in Benjamin's collection. On the contrary, if we contrast this to the titles of other books on Judaism which

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preoccupation in his 1916 essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, as we shall see in the next chapter.

<sup>28</sup> 'Wann bringen sie den Molitor?' (GB II, 19).

Scholem lent him, including Samson Rafael Hirsch's *Neunzehn Briefe über das Judentum, Rom und Jerusalem* by Moses Hess and a number of essays by Achad Ha'am (the pen name of Asher Ginzberg, the founding father of cultural Zionism), Molitor's name stands out through its sheer longevity in Benjamin's correspondence.<sup>30</sup> It sounds as if Benjamin was actually fulfilling the intention he stated in the first letter of studying the material thoroughly, and that he still felt the need to return to the book two years later. Even if any *direct* influence of *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* on the language essay of 1916 is denied, the possible bearing of this very book on the essays Benjamin wrote since then, including *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, *Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, *Theologisch-politisches Fragment*, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, *Über das Mimetische Vermögen* and *Lehre vom Ähnlichen*, to name but six striking titles, cannot be justifiably discounted without at least knowing the content of what is discounted.<sup>31</sup> And there is in fact sufficient reason to

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<sup>29</sup> GB I, 'Anmerkungen der Herausgeber', pp. 518-519.

<sup>30</sup> The final mention of Molitor in the correspondence comes in April 1934, when Scholem, in one of his many attempts to provide Benjamin with a means of subsistence, suggests that he should edit selections from *Philosophie der Geschichte* for Schocken: 'Ich hatte den Vorschlag gemacht, Dich eine Auswahl aus Molitor besorgen zu lassen.' (letter from Scholem to Benjamin, dated 19 April 1934, in Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *Briefwechsel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 135). Even though neither the publisher nor Benjamin seemed to be brimming with enthusiasm for the idea at the time, this casual mention of the name Molitor, more than fifteen years after its first appearance, can only serve to emphasise the importance of *Philosophie der Geschichte* for both Benjamin and Scholem.

<sup>31</sup> In a diary entry dated 8/9 October 1916, more than a month before Benjamin wrote *Über Sprache*, Scholem has copied out two pages from a notebook Benjamin lent to him, which contained 'Notizen zu einer Arbeit über die Kategorie der Gerechtigkeit' (Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. I, p. 401). These notes are about the difference between law and justice, about divine justice and the messianic and about socialism and communism. In other words, four years before he actually wrote *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, Benjamin was already thinking about these topics at the time when he was beginning to develop a more intimate knowledge of Judaism (taught by a Scholem, who showed an astonishing intellectual activity at the time). In fact, on the same day

suspect that Menninghaus not only failed to read or consult *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, but that he probably never even saw an actual copy of the book, instead relying entirely on information provided by Scholem in *Geschichte einer Freundschaft* and in the notes to the first edition of the letters. The fact that Menninghaus mentions the book in his 'Verzeichnis der Zitierten Schriften' without ever actually quoting *from* it is in itself enough to arouse suspicion, a suspicion that is only reinforced by a thorough reading of the book itself, which contains quite a large number of passages which bear a striking resemblance to certain elements in Benjamin's language philosophy, as we will see later.

Yet if we again revert to fine-toothed philology, although some might call it Holmesian pedantry, we are confronted with a fact that may confirm these suspicions. There is the fact that Menninghaus does not quote the full title of the book, which is the rather cumbrous, but to his argument quite relevant, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition in dem alten Bunde und ihre Beziehung zur Kirche des neuen Bundes mit vorzüglicher Rücksicht auf die Kabbalah*. But, although very arbitrary, this in itself could still be easily attributed to a sense of bibliographical economy. The one fact that truly hypothecates the credibility of Menninghaus's argument is that the bibliographical details are not only incomplete, but also wrong. The dates of publication he mentions are 1827 to 1857, which are the dates of *five* volumes instead of four: volume one was published in 1827, volume two in 1834,

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that Scholem copied out these *Notizen*, Benjamin and himself read *Die Schwankenden* by Achad Ha'am together. The possible influence of this author on Benjamin still remains to be investigated.

volume three in 1839, volume four in 1853 and the second edition of volume one in 1857. In *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Scholem gives the same dates (1827-1857) without, however, making any mention of the second edition of volume four.<sup>32</sup> Oddly enough, in the notes to the first edition of the correspondence, he gives the dates of the first editions of all volumes, i.e. 1827-1853.<sup>33</sup> What Scholem fails to mention in both cases is the publisher or the place of publication. Menninghaus gives the place of publication as 'Münster', which is, however, only correct when referring to the first edition of volumes two, three and four and the second edition of volume one, which were indeed published in Münster by Theissing from 1834 to 1857. The date of the first edition of the first volume is indeed 1827, but the place of publication is not Münster, and the publisher is not Theissing. The first edition of volume one was in fact published in Frankfurt am Main by Hermann. If Menninghaus had consulted the book, he would have known this, and the entry in his bibliography would have read either *Frankfurt and Münster, 1827-1857 (or 1853)* or *Münster, 1834-1857*. Admittedly a pedantic point, but this is not a mistake one makes when one writes down the details from the actual copy of the book rather than from a secondary source. We may therefore conclude that Menninghaus's objection to Molitor ought to have been overruled twenty years ago, on the grounds that it was based entirely on hearsay, and that the sentence should hence be reviewed. Actually, if we would call for the Molitor case

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<sup>32</sup> Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> *Briefe*, p. 136.

merely to be re-opened, we would already fail to do it justice, as all the evidence points to the fact that it was never really opened in the first place.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *En lieu* of a lengthy literature review, suffice it here to say that Menninghaus is the only author who even mentions Molitor in connection with Benjamin, which means that the literature review is essentially complete once we have thrown out Menninghaus's claim. None of the authors named in the bibliography, including Alter, Buck-Morss, De Vries, Handelman, Konersmann, Menke, Meschonnic, Mosès, Nägele, Opitz, Rabinbach, Rochlitz, Rose, Schmidt, Schöne, Schweppenhäuser, Smith and Weber address the role of Molitor in Benjamin's *Auseinandersetzung* with the Jewish tradition. In his study *Walter Benjamin: Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), Bernd Witte mentions the possible influence of Molitor in a footnote, but he relates it only, and very briefly, to Benjamin's theory of allegory in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, quoting as his source an MA dissertation by Reiner Dieckhoff, *Mythos und Moderne: Über die verborgene Mystik in den Schriften Walter Benjamins* (Diss. Masch., Köln, 1976). (Unfortunately, even though Dieckhoff did publish his work in 1987 – albeit with a little-known publishing house in Köln – he seems to have failed to make his mark on Benjamin studies, as Witte is the only scholar who appears to be aware of the dissertation's existence. Since Dieckhoff's work has been largely ignored, it was only by chance that we stumbled upon it, unfortunately less than two months before this thesis was submitted, leaving rather less time than necessary to obtain a copy of the book. Nevertheless, we can safely assume that its impact on our own project will be of limited importance, as Dieckhoff's discussion of Molitor does not appear to extend beyond a few pages, and the entire book is less than 120 pages long). Some authors, however, such as John McCole, have actually managed to write an entire book about Benjamin and tradition without devoting even so much as a subsection to Judaism. McCole's book, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) does at least mention Molitor, if only very much in passing, but he essentially culls all his information about him from Menninghaus, so his book has no relevance whatsoever for our purpose. Oddly enough, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* is almost exclusively concerned with Benjamin's well-known theories of experience, with a few token references to the concepts of messianism and Kabbalah, which makes the title somewhat misleading, to say the least. We shall return to the secondary literature on Benjamin's Judaism in the next chapter, when we will discuss the importance of the mainstream Jewish tradition for his work, the irrelevance of which seems to be taken for granted by most of the authors mentioned in this footnote (An attitude which is not unlike being prepared to allow the influence of Einstein on the work of Stephen Hawking while denying the latter even the most basic knowledge of Newtonian physics).

## II

Despite all this circumstantial evidence, the strongest argument in favour of the relevance of Molitor to Benjamin's work, direct as well as indirect, first-hand as well as second-hand, is still the actual content of the book. As we suggested above, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* is an extremely wide-ranging and truly encyclopaedic book. Its four volumes were actually intended as an introduction to an even larger work devoted exclusively to the Kabbalah, a work which Molitor announces several times throughout the book but which was never written.<sup>35</sup> On 23 March 1860, only three years after the second edition of the first volume was published, Molitor died before he was able to finish the second part of volume four, apparently leaving no unpublished manuscripts behind.<sup>36</sup> Thus this great work, in status as well as in stature, has remained fragmentary in two ways. Nevertheless, it is an invaluable compendium of information on the Jewish tradition. Very broadly speaking, the book has three basic aims, although even this very elementary level of inner organisation sometimes appears to lose itself in the most unexpected, but utterly fascinating, digressions. And in a way, as we suggested in the previous chapter, these digressions and circumambulations of the main topic become the point, and the actual 'topic' then becomes a dark and hidden presence surrounded by the halo of ideas. This peculiar *Gedankenbewegung* is

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<sup>35</sup> See for instance *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, vol. III, p. 119.

<sup>36</sup> Christoph Schulte, "Die Buchstaben haben... ihre Wurzeln oben", p. 151.

the elusive conceptual intersection where Molitor's and Benjamin's thought meet, as the following paragraphs and the next chapter will attempt to illustrate, gradually and peripatetically, as is meet for traditional wisdom.

The first aim of *Philosophie der Geschichte* is to prepare the ground for an in-depth discussion of the metaphysics of the Kabbalah: 'Die Aufmerksamkeit auf diese wichtige, seit so langher vernachlässigte, Untersuchung der alten jüdischen Urtradition aus ihren Quellen, von neuem wieder zu wecken, ist der Zweck gegenwärtiger Schrift.'<sup>37</sup> Molitor never arrived at this discussion, but in his preparations for it, he frequently quotes from various mystical traditions next to the more conventional Talmudic sources. He thus effectively presents a picture of the Jewish tradition that lacks the strict separation of mystical and theosophical writings from the more 'mainstream' legal, ethical and philosophical texts. The hypothesis that there is a strict division between 'mystical' and 'mainstream' Judaism was put forward during the Haskalah with the aim of presenting Judaism as a *Vernunftreligion*, and it was later contested in several ways by Gershom Scholem. This tendency to relegate everything that sounded faintly mystical to the realms of irrationality and obscurantism, and thus outside the scope of rational inquiry and explanation, explains the near total lack of serious inquiry into the Kabbalah, which persisted until Scholem embarked on his lifelong study of the subject. Molitor, however, does not believe that the division was as radical as even 'einige jüdische Theologen behaupten': 'Im Judenthum aber war das Esoterische vom Exoterischen nur leise geschieden, und von dem einen zum andern ein leichter



stufenmäßiger Uebergang eröffnet. Die Juden kannten keine abgeschlossenen Mysterien im Sinne der heidnischen Völker. Alles war auf Erziehung des Ganzen, als eines heiligen göttlichen Volkes und priesterlichen Reiches angelegt.<sup>37</sup> Molitor claims that most of the knowledge of what is now termed the Jewish mystical tradition actually trickled down to the ordinary people, the *Am Ha'aretz*, through the oral teaching of priests and rabbis. According to Molitor, in other words, the mystical teachings that were later written down in such books as the *Zohar* and the *Ra'ja Mehemna* were already contained in the *Torah She-be'al-peh* or the oral Torah. Molitor's hypothesis is that these mystical teachings were far less esoteric in early Mishnaic and Talmudic times, and that their essence was therefore part and parcel of the religious experience of most Jews. The terms 'mysticism' or 'mystical teachings', although Molitor does not provide us with a straightforward definition of them, are predominantly used in the context of hidden, secret or allegorical meanings of Scripture. With reference to these hidden meanings of the Torah, he writes:

Obwohl nun zwar in der Thorah nirgends mit ausdrücklichen Worten gelehrt, noch auch, in der jüdischen Glaubenslehre, geradezu zu glauben geboten wird, daß die heilige Schrift noch einen innern verborgenen Sinn

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<sup>37</sup> 'Again to draw the attention to this important, but since long ignored investigation of the old Jewish *Ur*-tradition from its sources is the aim of the present book.' (MI, 9).

<sup>38</sup> 'In Judaism, however, the esoteric was only slightly separated from the exoterical, and a gradual, step by step transition was open between them. The Jews did not know any secluded mysteries in the sense of the pagan peoples. Everything was aimed at the education of the whole, of one holy people and priestly empire.' (MI, 201). I have chosen not to amend the archaisms and inconsistencies of Molitor's spelling or grammar, as I feel they contribute to the character of the book, giving it, in a way, the authority of the tractate of which Benjamin spoke.

in sich schließe, der dem Moscheh auf dem Berge Sinai eröffnet worden; so gehöret doch der Glaube an diesen geheimen tiefern Sinn der Schrift keineswegs, wie einige jüdische Theologen behaupten, zu den blos [sic] subjektiven, theologischen Meinungen, sondern er macht einen wesentlichen Bestandtheil, – er macht die wahre innere Seele – des Judenthums selbst aus.<sup>39</sup>

Although he admits that a full and intimate knowledge of the mystical tradition was granted only to the wisest of the Jews, and that the study of secret, mystical meanings of the Torah was not actively encouraged (the active study of 'higher mysticism' was discouraged, even, to protect the 'weak and unprepared characters' from its potentially dangerous effects<sup>40</sup>), Molitor insists that the mystical tradition was not only an integral part of the Jewish tradition as a whole, but that there was no fundamental opposition between them, as they were both based on the same age-old principles and have grown out of the same seed. The description of these mystical teachings as the 'wahre innere

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<sup>39</sup> 'Even though it is not taught explicitly anywhere in the Torah, nor commanded by the Jewish doctrine, that the Holy Scriptures contain an inner, hidden meaning, which was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, the belief in this secret, deep meaning does not at all belong, as some Jewish theologians claim, to merely subjective theological opinion, but actually constitutes an essential part, – the inner soul, in fact – of Judaism itself.' (MI, 12).

<sup>40</sup> 'Die judische Kirche überläßt vielmehr diese Sache [the study of hidden meanings of the Torah], als etwas rein Innerliches, dem eignen innern Gefühle eines Jeden, und weit entfernt, gewisse allgemein verbindende mystische Lehrsätze aufzustellen, sucht dieselbe sogar die Forschung in der höheren Mystik zu beschränken, um den gefährlichen Folgen vorzubeugen, die für schwache und unvorbereitete Gemüther leicht entspringen können; daher nur die Weisesten im Volke zur Einweihung in die höheren Geheimnisse gelangen konnten.' (MI, 12-13). The idea that mainstream Judaism sought to police mystical traditions because of their radical, antinomian, anarchist and apocalyptic potential is also conveyed by several of Scholem's writings, most famously his study of Shabbetai Tsevi, the seventeenth-century false Messiah.

Seele des Judenthums' is quite crucial, suggesting, as it does, a hidden, inner continuity which survived even the most drastic of outward changes, even, up to a certain extent, the advent of Christianity, as we will see later. Describing the gradual expansion of the Jewish tradition throughout the centuries, he writes:

Diese immer größere Erweiterung der Tradition ist aber nicht etwa eine Folge fremdartiger Zuthaten gewesen, die man von außen in dieselbe hineingeschwärzt, sondern es war in der That ein wirkliches Wachsen und Entfalten von innen heraus; denn alle spätere Satzungen und Institutionen, sammt dem ganzen Lehrgebäude der Kirche, sind alle gewissermaßen auf die uralten Prinzipien basirt, und liegen in denselben gleichsam wie in ihrem Keime verschlossen da. *Die gesammte jüdische Tradition, ein dogmatisches, fortschreitendes Ganzes bildend, gleicht also einem Baume, dessen mannigfaltige Auszweigungen doch alle aus einem Stamme hervorgesproßt sind.*<sup>41</sup>

The botanical metaphor Molitor uses to describe the fundamental unity of the Jewish tradition, which recurs several times throughout the four volumes, is reminiscent of Goethe's concept of the *Urpflanze*, of which Benjamin himself

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<sup>41</sup> 'This ever larger expansion of tradition was not, however, the consequence of alien ingredients, which were smuggled into it from the outside, but it was in fact a real growth and development from within; for all the later statutes and institutions, together with the entire doctrinal construction of the church, are all to a certain extent based on age-old principles, and are contained within these principles as within their seed, so to speak. *The entire Jewish tradition, which constitutes a dogmatic,*

was also quite fond. The idea that the whole development of a plant, from origin to decay, is contained within its seed is taken up in the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede to Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, where it is applied to the realm of ideas (and used in conjunction with Leibniz's concept of the monad to form an extraordinarily complex doctrine of ideas<sup>42</sup>). Applied to the Jewish tradition, however, the effect of this metaphor is to create not only a sense of unity and integrity, but also a sense of simultaneity. It means that the ultimate doctrinal complexities of Judaism are already present within its origin in a very real sense, which is exemplified both by the formal structure of the Talmud, as a twin process of continuous accumulation and conservation, and by the conceptual structure of rabbinic literature, which allows the appearance of figures from different historical eras within one and the same sphere. The metaphor in question thus suggests that the Jewish understanding of the sphere of temporality is essentially characterised by a sense of simultaneity. Tradition, in other words, is seen as a viscous, multi-dimensional

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*progressive whole, is thus like a tree, whose many branches have nevertheless all grown out of the same stem.*' (MI, 19; Molitor's emphasis).

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin's *Ideenlehre* or doctrine of ideas is a complicated, almost baroque construction, which can be found at the seams of his work from its very beginnings. It is drafted in the essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* and elaborated in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, where Leibniz's monad and the concept of allegory are brought into the picture. Later mentions of the monad, the idea, the allegory and the dialectical image in the series of essays on Baudelaire and in the notes for the *Passagen-Werk* make it clear that all of these terms are part of the construction that is this enigmatic *Ideenlehre*, or, as the veil of mystery shrouding this *Ideenlehre* is never removed entirely, it may well be the case that all these terms *are* in fact the *Ideenlehre*, merely seen from a different perspective. Benjamin believed that criticism ought to use those concepts which were most suited to its objects, and these objects might be as different from each other as sixteenth-century emblems are from prostitutes, but that does not necessarily mean that the apparently different concepts he uses are radically different in their deepest essence. In *De Dwerg in de Schaakautomaat*, particularly in the final two chapters, Lieven De Cauter sets out to

whole, in spatial rather than in temporal terms, brought together in the concept of the *Lehre*. Significantly, this is also the conclusion which Scholem drew from his reading of *Philosophie der Geschichte*, as he states quite emphatically in a long letter to Siegfried Lehmann dated 9 October 1916, a month before Benjamin wrote *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*:

[...] *das ist der Begriff und die Wirklichkeit der 'Thora', das ist der jüdische Begriff der Lehre, das ist der unerhört tiefe, wahre und von uns in Wahrheit zu verwirklichende jüdische Begriff der 'Tradition'*. Nicht mit Leichtsinn hat Franz Molitor, der große christliche Kabbalist, sein außerordentliches Buch über die Kabbala – mit dem die ganze Größe des Mannes tatsächlich in einem Worte kennzeichnenden Titel versehen: *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über Tradition!!!* Herr Lehmann, ein Buch über die jüdische Mystik von einem Mystiker mit dem Titel über Tradition! Jawohl, wer das 'Wort' hat, hat das Judentum, aber dieses Wort begreift man nicht, wenn man nicht das Werk kennt, das Wesen der Thora begreift man nicht, wenn man sie nicht kennt, und den *jüdischen* Gottesbegriff begreift man nicht, 'erlebt' man nicht, wenn man nicht Gottes Werk kennt, Gottes Tat. Thora ist nicht Pentateuch allein, Thora ist der Inbegriff, das Integral der religiösen Überlieferungen der Judenheit von Mosche Rabbenu bis auf Israel Hildesheimer, bis auf Sie, Herr Lehmann, wenn Sie ein Jude sind, und die Thora – nach dem

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illustrate this very continuity of Benjamin's *Ideenlehre* from *Über Sprache* to the *Passagen-Werk* (Nijmegen:SUN, 1999).

wahren Worte der Mystiker – vollkommen sein in den Tagen des Messias.<sup>43</sup>

This quotation, proclaiming the integrity and inclusiveness of the Jewish tradition, could serve as a concise summary of the argument Molitor stretches across nearly two thousand pages, and, in fact, as an abstract of our previous chapter. But what makes it even more noteworthy, apart from its temporal proximity to that fateful 11 November 1916, is the fact that Scholem actually read out this letter to Benjamin a week after it was written and that Benjamin ‘congratulated him’ on it, asking for a transcript and stating ‘es sei das erste Mal, daß jemand diese Ansichten wie er habe.’<sup>44</sup> This means that less than three weeks before Benjamin was to start writing *Über Sprache*, he actually confessed to having the same thoughts on tradition and the *Lehre* as Scholem,

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<sup>43</sup> ‘[...] *that is the concept and the reality of the ‘Torah’, that is the Jewish concept of the doctrine [Lehre], that is the tremendously profound, true Jewish concept of ‘tradition’ which is to be realised in truth by us.* It is not without reason that Franz Molitor, the great Christian kabbalist, gave his extraordinary book about the Kabbala the title *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über Tradition!!!* – which effectively characterized the greatness of the man in one word. Mister Lehmann, a book about Jewish mysticism by a mystic with the title on tradition! Indeed, he who has the ‘word’, has Judaism, but this word cannot be understood when one does not know the work, the essence of the Torah cannot be understood, when one does not know it, and the Jewish concept of God cannot be understood, cannot be ‘experienced’, when one does not know God’s work, God’s act. God’s act, however, is ‘tradition’, the ‘Torah’. Torah is not the Pentateuch only, Torah is the quintessence, the integral of the religious traditions of Jewry from Moshe Rabbenu to Israel Hildesheimer, to you, mister Lehmann, if you are a Jew, and the Toah will be complete – according to the true words of the mystic – in the days of the Messiah.’ (Gerschom Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. I, pp. 47-48; *Scholem’s emphasis*). This letter is remarkable in many ways, not in the least in its knowledgeable and authoritative tone, but most importantly because it discusses such subjects as the magic of language, the concepts of tradition and totality and study or *Talmud Torah*. Notably in a discussion of Benjamin’s *Über Sprache*, any reference to these topics which might possibly have influenced its composition cannot be disregarded. We shall return to this matter in the next chapter.

who was, as we have seen, not only thoroughly impressed by Molitor's work, but was at that very time engaged in an in-depth study of *Philosophie der Geschichte*. With this knowledge, we can comfortably and definitively reject Menninghaus's argument that Benjamin could not possibly have picked up that much information about the Jewish tradition from his conversations with Scholem at the time. In fact, the sheer intelligence and authority even of Scholem's private writings during these years is so remarkable that, if Benjamin only retained half of what Scholem told him, he would have been well-informed on matters Jewish by any standard.

Molitor's insistence on the unity of tradition is probably reinforced by his (mistaken) conviction that the mystical tradition is a good deal older than nineteenth-century scholarship thought. He believes that the mystical doctrine of Judaism, which constituted the 'soul' of the religion in Biblical times, was kept alive primarily in an oral form and gradually found its way into writing as early as patriarchal times, when its essential doctrinal statements were set down in esoteric documents (which did not survive, or remain hidden to this day).<sup>45</sup> But Molitor also dates surviving mystical documents further back in time than other scholars of his (and our) age. The *Sefer Yetsirah* or the *Book of Creation*, for instance, a very complex document from the third or fourth century CE expounding the famous doctrine of the *Sefirot* or numbers, which the kabbalist

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<sup>44</sup> 'I read [Benjamin] the Lehmann-letter on Torah, on which he congratulated me and asked me for a transcript; this was the first time that somebody had these opinions as he had.' (Gerschom Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. I, p. 409).

<sup>45</sup> 'Diese mystische Lehre, die einst im Alterthum die wahre Seele des ganzen Lebens ausmachte, wurde meistens bloß mündlich fortgepflanzt; doch sollen schon die frühern Weisen, ja sogar die Patriarchen, die wesentlichsten Lehrsätze derselben in besondern geheimen Schriften niedergelegt haben.' (MI, 64)

tradition attributes to Abraham, is said by Molitor to bear the marks of 'early antiquity'.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the *Ra'ja Mehemna*, a book which is traditionally attributed to Moses and which is part of the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (or *Zohar*), is said by Molitor to stem from Biblical times.<sup>47</sup> It is Molitor's dating of the *Zohar* itself, however, which has the most far-reaching consequences for his view of Jewish mysticism. Essentially, he accepts the kabbalist attribution of this most famous and influential book in the Jewish mystical canon to Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, a pupil of Rabbi Akibah, who lived in the second century CE. Gershom Scholem has since confirmed the hypothesis that the actual author was the Spanish kabbalist Moshe Shem Tov of Léon, who died in 1305 and probably wrote the work in the latter quarter of the thirteenth century.<sup>48</sup> Oddly enough, Molitor is actually aware of this hypothesis, but he rejects it outright in favour of the traditional kabbalist attribution, arguing against post-Amoraic times as the *terminus ad quem* on the grounds that the mystical hermeneutics of the *Zohar* were already known, in a primarily oral form, during Mishnaic times.<sup>49</sup>

This is basically the same argument he used to hint at the intimate relationship between the mystical tradition and the oral Torah, and its effect is

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<sup>46</sup> 'Auf jeden Fall trägt dieses dunkle, räthselhafte und Inhaltschwere [sic] Buch, wenn es auch nicht von Abraham selber herrühret, doch das Gepräge eines hohen Altherthums an sich, [...]' (MI, 65).

<sup>47</sup> See MI, 65-66.

<sup>48</sup> See Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), p. 204 ff.

<sup>49</sup> 'Wollen mehrere, insonderheit Morinus, behaupten, weil man viele von den Parabeln und mystischen Lehren des Sohars in den Midraschim und der G'mara finde, so mußte dieses Buch nach diesen Schriften verfaßt seyn. Welch ein Schluß! Wie kann man wohl glauben, daß die mystische Erklärungs-Weise erst zur Zeit der G'mara aufgekommen, da man in der Mischnah, die doch ein kurzer Inbegriff der Gesetzes-Tradition ist, die deutlichsten Beweise der allerhöchsten Mystik findet, [...]' (MI, 74).



to produce a more homogeneous picture of the different strands of the Jewish tradition than modern scholarship has indicated. In this sense, in fact, Molitor's book is closer to the letter of the Jewish tradition itself, however unorthodox it may seem in other places. One of these unorthodox connections made by Molitor is directly related to his backdating of the main writings of the mystical tradition to early Tannaitic times, i.e. the second century CE. These were the times, immediately after the destruction of the Second Temple, when a small messianic-apocalyptic sect produced its primary texts, later canonized as the four (Christian) Gospels. And Molitor does indeed appear eager to suggest a connection between the *Zohar* and the Gospels, however vague it remains here. In a discussion of the dialogical and peripatetic teaching methods of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, Molitor adds a footnote saying : 'Daher hat der Sohar *in dieser Hinsicht* auch mit der Form der Erzählung des neuen Testamentes große Aehnlichkeit.'<sup>50</sup> This brings us to the second intention of *Philosophie der Geschichte*, conveyed by the subtitle *über die Tradition in dem alten Bunde und ihre Beziehung zur Kirche des neuen Bundes*. In a not entirely systematic way, *radikal* rather than *konsistent*, Molitor seeks to bring Judaism and Christianity closer to one another, and in some ways even to construct a more or less unified *Judaeochristianity*, in which both religions enter into infinitely complex relationships with one another, ultimately becoming mutually inclusive. It is a movement similar to the one he performed with regard to the twin traditions of Judaism itself, and he reverts to the same metaphor to describe it : 'Judenthum und Christenthum verhalten sich wie Knospe und

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<sup>50</sup> 'For this reason, the *Zohar in this respect* also shows great similarity with the form

Blüte, was in dem einen noch verschlossen liegt, ist in dem andern durch die Sonne des Lebens in reicher herrlicher Fülle aufgegangen.<sup>51</sup> Of course, by intertwining Judaism and Christianity so intimately, the conclusion that neither can exist without the other becomes inevitable. It is needless to say that this unorthodoxy *à coup redoublé* failed to charm a large number of people in Molitor's day. In fact, the three hundred supplementary pages in the second edition of the first volume are almost exclusively concerned with polemics against both Jewish and Christian scholars who disagreed with Molitor.<sup>52</sup> Of course, Molitor remains a Christian author, which means that he fundamentally disagrees with Judaism's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah (he is always very careful to say that this is a doctrinal error of Judaism, not of the Jews). Yet these statements, which he does not make frequently, are more than balanced by Molitor's reverent and respectful attitude towards Jews and Judaism, convinced that in spite of its 'error', for want of a milder term, Judaism has been promised 'eine Dauer bis zum letzten Ende'.<sup>53</sup> On the one hand, he is in

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of the narrative of the New Testament.' (MI, 70n; Molitor's emphasis).

<sup>51</sup> 'Judaism and Christianity relate to each other like bud and flower, what lies enclosed in the one, has been opened in the other, in rich and glorious fullness, by the sun of life.' (MI, 313). See also MIII, 86 and MIV, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Personal communication with Dr. Christoph Schulte, 7 March 2000.

<sup>53</sup> 'Die sogenannte Civilisation, wodurch der Jude von dem alten Orientalismus abgeführt, und dem europäischen Leben assimilirt wird, darf durchaus nicht gehemmt, und dem Juden die Annäherung zu dem Christen versagt werden; solches wäre nicht nur unmenschlich, sondern den Lehren des Christenthums völlig zuwider; andern Theils darf aber auch keine Regierung die Hand dazu bieten, den Rabbinismus zu zerstören. Denn dieses hieße das Judenthum, welchem eine Dauer bis zum letztem Ende geweissagt ist, selber ausrotten, und in den Plan der Gottheit selber eingreifen. Kein menschlicher Verstand vermag hier aus sich, das Rechte zu treffen.' (MI, 291) Note the use of the word 'ausrotten' with reference to Judaism and Molitor's extremely strong disapproval of any attempts to hinder the continued existence of Rabbinic Judaism, as this would constitute an unjustifiable human intervention into the divine plan and not, as Derrida would have it, divine violence (on this posthumous controversy between Benjamin and Derrida, see Lieven De Caeter, 'On Divine

favour of assimilation, saying that it should not under any circumstances be discouraged, yet on the other hand, he firmly opposes attempts of any kind to threaten the existence of Rabbinic Judaism. But for all his tolerance, which is extremely broad for its day and age, Molitor does indeed seek to give Judaism a christological turn, 'durchaus grundlos', as Scholem stated on numerous occasions,<sup>54</sup> by importing the persons of the Holy Trinity into the Kabbalah and equating them with the first three Sefirot, *Keter Elyon*, *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, which together form the *Ein Soph* or the unfathomable Godhead.<sup>55</sup> Of course, as Molitor himself says as well, it is an equally valid perspective to see this as a kabbalist interpretation of the Holy Trinity.

If Molitor's version of Judaism is academically idiosyncratic – because it is, in its own paradoxical ways, closer to a traditional *Überarbeitung* of the Jewish tradition than it is to a scientific interpretation of it, as even Gershom Scholem admitted – his version of Christianity is no less thought-provoking, or even provocative. Rather than seeing the filial relationship between the two religions as a revolution, a break, an overturning, a sublation or an abrogation, Molitor is trying to think the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in terms of a coexistence, politically, philosophically and religiously, even though this forces him to suspend a number of inevitable internal contradictions. We already touched briefly upon the social and political consequences of Molitor's sympathy for Jews and Judaism, and the following may serve as an example of

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Violence and Human Happiness: Walter Benjamin's *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*', in *Critical Theology* 1 (forthcoming).

<sup>54</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 53.

<sup>55</sup> See *M II*, 52ff., a chapter entitled *Versuch einer speculativen Entwicklung der allgemeine Grundbegriffe der Theosophie nach den Grundsätzen der Kabbalah*.

exactly how far this takes him. At more than one point in the book, Molitor, a Catholic, argues passionately and at length against the (Christian) accusation that the Jews alone are guilty of the death of Christ:

Die Verwerfung und Kreuzigung des Gott-Menschen durch seine eigenen Kinder, ist die schrecklichste That, welche seit Anbeginn vollbracht worden. Doch nicht die Juden allein haben den Heiland verworfen, die Verwerfung ist keine individuelle, sondern eine allgemeine That, woran die ganze Menschheit Theil hat und mit erniedrigt wird. [...] Theilen wir also lieber freiwillig die Schuld mit den Juden, statt dieselben wiederholt anzuklagen. Indem wir alle Schuld einzig und allein auf das jüdische Volk wälzen, so stellen wir uns als die Gerechten dar, wähnend, als hätten wir an ihrer Stelle es besser gemacht ; solches aber ist ein Gräuel vor dem Herrn.<sup>56</sup>

The attitude which speaks from this passage seems to be very 'Christian' in its call for forgiveness and its emphatic rejection of what was the main grist to the antisemitic mill (in which sense it could also be called distinctly anti-Christian, depending on whose definition of Christianity we would go by). Yet Molitor's political-theological position towards Judaism and the Jews cannot be called

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<sup>56</sup> 'The rejection and crucifixion of the God-man by his own children is the most horrific act to have been committed since the beginning of time. But it is not the Jews alone who have rejected the Saviour, the rejection is not an individual but a general act, in which the whole of mankind has part and by which it is humbled. [...] Let us therefore rather voluntarily share the guilt with the Jews, instead of accusing them time and again. By putting the blame solely on the Jewish people, we present

liberal *stricto sensu*, because, despite his insistence on forgiveness (or, from the other perspective, because of his sole insistence on forgiveness), he still states in as many words that the Jews were wrong to have rejected the Messiah. A liberal perspective would demand a fundamental level of tolerance for the alterity of the other *in his alterity*. But, and this is the cross from which Molitor's Judaeochristian puppet is suspended, he effectively denies the discreet integrity of both religions, thus reducing their alterity towards each other. His calling on Christianity to take the burden of 'Jewish' guilt as its own is symptomatic of Molitor's profound interfusion of both religions, as is his insistence on the genealogical obligation of Christianity towards Judaism (an obligation echoed in the third commandment of the law which they share). Brushing against the grain of orthodoxy from both perspectives, Molitor compromises the integrity of Judaism as well as Christianity by entering them into a dialectic of sorts, making them fundamentally codependent. According to him, Judaism is the outward form of the inwardness of Christianity, yet the latter does not contain anything which the former did not also contain.

Throughout *Philosophie der Geschichte*, Molitor uses the image of history as a dual process of centrifugality and centripetality. In a centrifugal movement, Judaism constitutes the externalisation of the law, which is countered by the centripetal movement of Christianity as an internalisation of the same law. This twin process of alternating centrifugality and centripetality is mirrored and repeated throughout natural and human (and divine) history in several permutations. It would lead us too far to describe this complex mystical

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ourselves as the righteous ones, imagining that we would have acted better in their

concept in any great detail, but it is important insofar as it is *not quite* a dialectic. Every time this semi-cyclical process is repeated, it essentially returns to its initial position, but not without retracing its footsteps and, in doing so, making them deeper. This process differs from a classical dialectic in that it does not sublate, but accumulate. As we have seen in the last chapter, accumulation rather than dogmatic exclusion is one of the most fundamental characteristics of the Jewish tradition, and even though it is applied here to particularly unorthodox ends, it remains the only way in which two opposites can be kept in permanent suspension, in oscillation. It is, not to put too fine a point on it, the basic structure of the *Dialektik im Stillstand*, or dialectics at a standstill, which is used here to reconcile the belief in Jesus the Messiah with the diametrically opposite belief that the Messiah is yet to come. One of the many descriptions of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism formulates the tension as follows :

Im Christenthum giebt es gleichfalls wie im Judenthum eine allgemeine dogmatisch verbindende und eine freie mystische Lehre, die von der Kirche nicht dogmatisch befohlen, sondern der innern Forschung eines Jeden überlassen bleibt. Obwohl das Christenthum das innere aufgeschlossene Judenthum ist und daher was in demselben nur dem innern geistigen Blicke zugänglich war, in jenem dem gläubigen Gemüthe offenkundig geworden, so hat doch auch wieder das Christenthum sein höhere verborgene Seite, die nur dem

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place; yet this is an abomination to the Lord.' (MI, 238-239).

aufgeschlossenen Sinne des weiter beförderten Gemüthes faßlich wird.  
Dies ist die höhere Mystik, auf die ohne Zweifel der Heiland zielt, wenn er zu seinen Jüngern (ehe sie den heiligen Geist erhalten hatten) spricht :  
'Ich könnte euch noch Vieles sagen, aber ihr könnt es noch nicht fassen.'  
Joh. 16.12.<sup>57</sup>

The insistence on the presence of a 'higher mysticism' which infuses Christianity is crucial. As we mentioned before, Molitor's time-scale of Jewish mysticism brings the earliest documents of the fledgling Christian church extremely close in time (and by default in space) to the *Zohar*, one of the most important texts of the Jewish mystical tradition, which he (mistakenly) dates back to 121 CE. This makes his claim that the New Testament shows a remarkable formal and stylistic resemblance to the *Zohar*, and thus to the tradition of Jewish mysticism, all the more acceptable, and the thought that there could be a certain correspondence between them thus does not appear too outlandish. But Molitor goes even further. He is not just seeking to establish a

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<sup>57</sup> 'In Christianity, as in Judaism, there is a general dogmatically binding doctrine and a free mystical doctrine, which the church does not command dogmatically, but which is left to the inner exploration of every individual. Even though Christianity is Judaism unlocked from within, and thus what was accessible only to the inner spiritual eye in the latter became manifest to the believing soul in the former, Christianity in its turn has its higher, hidden side, which can only be grasped by the revealed sense of the [spiritually] advanced soul. This is the higher mysticism, to which the Saviour no doubt alludes when he says to his disciples (before they had received the Holy Spirit): "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." (John, 16:12)' (*M I*, 299). There is an interesting parallel between this quotation and Molitor's description of Jewish mysticism in the introduction (see note 39), where he says that the study of higher mysticism in Judaism was also left to the individual rather than being actively encouraged by the 'church' (as he calls both the Jewish religious community and the Christian institution). This, in turn, is entirely in line with the view that Molitor seeks to present a homogeneous picture of judaeochristian mysticism,

correspondence between Jewish and Christian mysticism, but a real continuity. The botanical metaphor of the bud growing into the flower takes on its full significance here, as a variation of the Jewish *theologoumenon* that everything was already contained in the one and true revelation. One needs only to 'turn it over and over, for all is in it.' As Molitor says in the first book of *Philosophie der Geschichte* :

In dem zweiten Theile dieser Schrift werden wir es versuchen, die Existenz der mystischen Tradition im Judenthum und ihren Uebergang in das Christenthum kritisch zu beleuchten; wir bemerken daher hier vorläufig nur Folgendes. Es liegt schon in der Natur der Dinge, daß es niemals einen Sprung giebt, daß Alles, was in der Zukunft geschieht, schon in der Vergangenheit wie im Keime vorgebildet ist und sich daraus auf genetische Weise entwickelt. So lagen in den Gebräuchen des alten jüdischen Gesetzes die höchsten Geheimnisse des Christenthums alle auf symbolische Weise vorgestellt, und was das Symbol nur in seinen stummen Figuren andeutete, wurde durch den Mund der Propheten dem Verstande der Menschen wenigstens theilweise in hellerer Deutlichkeit aufgeschlossen.<sup>58</sup>

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both in time and in space, even though such a homogeneity was already disputed by scholars in his day and age.

<sup>58</sup> 'In the second part of this work we will try to shed a critical light on the existence of the mystical tradition in Judaism and its transition into Christianity; here we will only remark the following. It is inherent in the nature of things that there is never a leap, that everything which happens in the future is already prefigured in the past as in a seed, and that it develops from this in a genetic way. Thus the highest secrets of Christianity were already represented in a symbolical way in the customs of the old Jewish law, and what the symbol indicated in its mute figures, was at least partially



As this quotation indicates, Molitor sees the almost seamless continuity between Judaism and Christianity not only from the perspective of the latter, but also, and perhaps more surprisingly so, from the perspective of the former. Christianity undeniably uses Jewish concepts and categories in its own theology, rephrasing and reinterpreting them to create a *leicht entstellte* doctrine, a doctrine which is only slightly different from the Jewish one, and therefore, paradoxically, extremely different. Christians believe in the same God as Jews, but they also believe that the law this God revealed to his people has been incarnated into his son, the promised Messiah. In this respect, Molitor is correct in stating that the Christian expansion of the Jewish tradition was not 'eine Folge fremdartiger Zuthaten', as the life and meaning of Jesus are of course entirely based on interpretations of the Jewish doctrine of messianic expectation.<sup>59</sup> This makes it even more tempting to use the notion of the uncanny to illustrate this slight yet fundamental difference, whereby Christianity, so to speak, changed the position of one central piece of furniture in the house of Judaism, thus dramatically altering its atmosphere and making it uncomfortable to its own inhabitants. As with all analogies, this one too does

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and very clearly revealed [*aufgeschlossen*] to the human intellect through the mouth of the prophets.' (MI, 302).

<sup>59</sup> Molitor expresses the substantial importance of Judaism for Christianity in no uncertain terms: 'Weit wichtiger als die bloße Uebereinstimmung der Form ist die auffallende Aehnlichkeit des Inhaltes in der jüdischen Tradition und der christlichen Lehre, die freilich nicht durchgängig, doch aber in den meisten Hauptlehren deutlich hervortritt. So findet man in der jüdischen Mystik, außer dem Geheimniß der heil. Dreifaltigkeit, das Geheimniß der Erlösung, so wie noch viele andere sublime Lehren der christlichen Religion, wenn auch nicht immer ganz theologisch richtig ausgedrückt, doch wenigstens auf eine höchst frappante Weise angedeutet.' (MI, 305-306). Note in particular the claim that the Holy Trinity can also be found in Judaism, which we mentioned above.

not bear close scrutiny, but it expresses quite well the sense of sameness in difference which Molitor apparently seeks to convey.

From the perspective of Judaism, however, the same seamless continuity constitutes its own *Nachleben* within Christianity. If, to continue the metaphor, Christianity moved into the house of Judaism, the latter maintains a subdued but stubborn presence in a far corner, infusing the entire house with its almost unseen presence. As Molitor says on several occasions, the deepest secrets of Christianity were already contained in the oldest Jewish laws, and by extension, the oldest Jewish laws still survive in and within Christianity. In a discussion of the Christian calendar in book IV, for instance, Molitor writes:

Bei diesem christlichen Festcyklus stellt sich ein auffallender Parallelismus mit dem des Judenthums heraus, welcher offenbar die innige Verwandtschaft zwischen Judenthum und Christenthum beweist und zeigt, daß Ersteres durch die Erscheinung des letztern nicht schlechthin aufgehoben, sondern vielmehr in dasselbe organisch aufgenommen und nur höher potenziert wurde, wie solches auch bei den christlichen Sakramenten zu ersehen, deren Grundbasis ganz im Judenthum ruht.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> 'This Christian cycle of religious feasts exhibits a remarkable parallel to that of Judaism, which obviously proves the intimate relationship between Judaism and Christianity and indicates that the former is not simply abrogated [*aufgehoben*] by the appearance of the latter, but rather organically taken up into it and only increased in strength, as can be seen in the Christian sacraments, whose entire foundation lies within Judaism.' (M IV, 42).

The organic metaphor which Molitor uses to describe their relationship justifies the use of the word 'seamless' in this context, as there is no sense of 'Ostentation der Faktur',<sup>61</sup> or emphatic artificiality, as Benjamin calls it in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in the transition between Judaism and Christianity. In fact, there is not even a transition in the real sense of the word, as Judaism is neither overcome nor overruled, but lives on at the very heart of Christianity, although, paradoxically, the latter is described as the internalisation of the former. The fact that we are so often forced to have recourse to the figure of the paradox to describe Molitor's vision of Judaism and Christianity is telling. The impression created by his vision, which is rather less systematic than our exposition, is one of a grand unified tradition, simultaneously incorporating Judaism and Christianity in one organic whole, infused by one and the same spirit which subordinates the very real differences between the two religions as mere externalities. It is easy to see how such a suspension of difference would lead to paradoxical constructions – which need not therefore become impossible constructions – and especially when discussing the historical particularities of both Judaism and Christianity, Molitor does appear to be very aware of the gaps and breaks between the two doctrines. These, however, are almost effortlessly sublated in the all-embracing concept of tradition. The title of the book, lest we forget, is *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, the most concise statement of the Molitor's philosophy which quite simply equates history with tradition. In this sense, intentionally or not, his vision is in fact closer to Judaism than it is to

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<sup>61</sup> I, 355.

Christianity, however eclectic and unorthodox the sum of all four volumes of the book may be even in terms of the legendarily inclusive Jewish tradition. The fact that the book presents itself as an introduction to a greater work, which has remained a promise, and that even this introduction has fundamentally remained a work in progress, may serve as further, if accidental, proof of this view.

Molitor goes to great and extraordinary lengths to indicate the extent of Judaism's afterlife, as we have called it, in the Christian tradition. But in doing so, he actually and possibly inadvertently puts forward the suggestion that the very substance of this Christian tradition is essentially Jewish. The casual remark, quoted above, that the gospels are formally similar to the *Zohar* is taken up again in a subsequent chapter, where he writes about the tension between the exoteric writings of the early Christian church, the first gospels composed in the late first century CE, and the esoteric oral tradition which Molitor claims underlay them.

Diese Schriften waren jedoch ursprünglich nicht für den öffentlichen, sondern zunächst für den Privatgebrauch des Einzelnen bestimmt, denn im Anfange geschah der Unterricht der Gemeinde durch die Apostel und Jünger, die noch von dem lebendig machende Geiste Gottes beseelt waren, nach der Weise des Heilandes blos durch das mündliche Wort. Man kann daher allerdings diese durch den Heiligen Geist geleisteten schriftlichen Fassungen der mündlichen Lehre gewissermaßen mit den M'gilloth S'tharim der Juden, §. 20., vergleichen, mit denen sie ihrer

ganzen Bestimmung nach die größte Aehnlichkeit haben. Sie waren von und für Solche gemacht, die mit der heiligen Lehre vertraut waren, daher die vielen Lücken und Dunkelheiten, so daß nicht einmal der Tag und das Jahr der Geburt des Heilandes bemerkt ist. Späterhin fing man an, die alten M'gilloth S'tharim der Apostel nebst ihren Schreiben an die Gemeinden zu sammeln, woraus der Canon des neuen Testaments hervorgegangen, der im strengen Sinn kein geschriebenes Gesetz ist, sondern blos die schriftlich verfaßte mündliche Tradition enthält.<sup>62</sup>

The formal parallel between this description of the early Christian church and the Jewish esoteric tradition as Molitor had described it earlier in the book is

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<sup>62</sup> 'Originally, these writings were not destined for public use, but for the private use of the individual, as the teaching of the community in the beginning was done by the apostels and disciples, who were still inspired by the life-giving spirit of God, and entirely through the spoken word, as the Saviour had done it. This is why, in any case, these written versions of the oral teaching, which were guided by the Holy Spirit, can in some ways be compared to the Megillot Setharim of the Jews (§. 20), to which they are very similar in their aims. They were made by and for those who were familiar with the holy doctrine, hence the many gaps and obscurities, to the extent that not even the day and the year of the Saviour's birth are mentioned. Later, people began to collect these old Megillot Setharim of the apostles side by side with their letters to the communities, from which the canon of the New Testament originated, which is not a written law in the strict sense, but merely contains the written version of the oral tradition.' (MI, 298). In § 20, pp. 17-18, Molitor had defined the Megillot Setharim as the concise written versions of the oral Torah, used by teachers as mnemonic aids, which were entirely esoteric, as students had to be taught through the spoken word only. This, as Molitor points out, is of course also the case with Jesus, who can only be seen writing once throughout the Gospels, in John 8:1-11 (where Jesus writes in the sand with his finger, but the reader is not told what). The passage in question cannot be found in the oldest manuscripts and versions of the New Testament, and its literary style does not match that of the rest of John, which has lead some to classify it as apocryphal. This doubtful provenance makes the passage even more fascinating, as it deals with the very questions of tradition and the permanence of writing. As John is by far the most literary and theoretically sophisticated of the four canonic gospels, it is tempting to read these passages as later literary *Überarbeitungen* of the fascinating subject matter of the gospels, exploring possibilities rather than recounting facts (which is, of course, an eminently intellectual endeavour, and one which also preoccupied Walter Benjamin, as we will see in the next chapter).

quite clear. In fact, if we may be allowed another parallel to gauge the import of this one, we could refer to Scholem's description of Benjamin as 'legitime[r] Fortsetzer der fruchtbaren und echten Traditionen {eines Hamann und Humboldt [apocryphal]}'.<sup>63</sup> From the abovementioned quotation, we can

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<sup>63</sup> '[...] the legitimate heir of the most fruitful and genuine traditions {of Hamann and Humboldt}.' (letter from Scholem to Benjamin, 30 March 1931, *Briefe*, p. 526 and *GB* IV, 27). This passage is yet another philological curiosity we have stumbled across in the increasingly complicated Benjaminian *Quellenstudium*. In the original two-volume edition of the letters, which is the one used by Menninghaus, the passage includes a reference to Hamann and Humboldt – which is one of the arguments quoted by Menninghaus to support his hypothesis that the sources of Benjamin's language mysticism are the early German Romantics and not the Jewish tradition. In fact, *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* actually opens with this very quotation, and promises to turn Scholem's subjunctive into an indicative by proving 'daß und wie weit Walter Benjamins Werk tatsächlich die genuinen sprachphilosophischen Intentionen "eines Hamann und Humboldt" sowie – vor allem – der sie vermittelnden Frühromantiker fortsetzt.' (p. 7). However, in volume IV of the *Gesammelte Briefe*, the new edition of Benjamin's correspondence, published in 1998, the passage reads: '[...] als legitimer Fortsetzer der fruchtbaren und echten Traditionen.' (p. 27). The source of this edition is the original letter from Scholem which was preserved in Benjamin's *Nachlaß*, so once again, Menninghaus's argument is found wanting in evidence (and this time in a particularly painful place: the first sentence of the entire book). It still remains somewhat of a mystery where the apocryphal reference to 'Hamann und Humboldt' came from: possibly from Scholem's carbon copy of the same letter, on which the first edition of the correspondence was based, and which might have been supplemented with these names, or become illegible over time. Whatever the case may be, the original obviously made no reference to the German Romantics, but merely mentions 'die fruchtbaren und echten Traditionen', which, bearing in mind the inclinations of its author, would not be hard to interpret as the Jewish or even Judaeo-Christian traditions. Furthermore, the context of this letter is the 'fusion' in Benjamin's work of theology, metaphysics and materialism, resulting in an ambiguity, a 'Schwebezustand', which Scholem describes quite bluntly not as productive, but as 'Selbsttäuschung': 'wie Du selbst völlig zutreffend an Rychner, wachsen Deine eigenen und soliden Erkenntnisse aus der sagen wir kurz Metaphysik der Sprache, welche recht eigentlich das ist, womit Du, zu unverstellter Klarheit gelangt, eine hochmächtige Figur in der Geschichte kritischen Denkens sein könntest, als legitimer Fortsetzer der fruchtbaren und echten Traditionen. Das ostensible Bemühen dagegegen, diese Resultate in einen Rahmen einzuspannen, in dem sie sich plötzlich als Resultate materialistischer Überlegungen darzustellen scheinen, gefährdet sie aufs stärkste, da es ein fremdes Form-Element hineinträgt, das zwar wohl mit Leichtigkeit von jedem intelligenten Leser loszulösen ist, das aber den von ihnen durchsetzten Produktionen den Stempel des Abenteuerlichen, Zweideutigen, ja in einigen Fällen fast Volteschlägerischen aufdrückt.' (pp. 27-28). Scholem's letter came in answer to a copy of letter to Max Rychner, which Benjamin had sent to him, and next to a discussion of Benjamin's preoccupation with dialectical materialism, this letter contained the following famous phrase, which Benjamin himself obviously did

conclude that Molitor sees Jesus and his followers as ‘die legitime Fortsetzer der fruchtbarsten und echten Traditionen eines Hillel und Schammai’, essentially establishing a seamless continuity between the Jewish and Christian traditions. Elsewhere Molitor notes the fact that Jesus’s close circle of twelve apostles and seventy disciples is based on numbers which have a profound mystical significance in Judaism, and he believes this suggests that Jesus ‘transferred the type of the Jewish hierarchy onto Christianity.’<sup>64</sup> But Molitor seeks to indicate more than a merely formal analogy between Judaism and Christianity at this stage, which can still be explained by the simple and undeniable fact that Jesus and his followers were Jews living in a Jewish country, and were thus forced to fall back on a Jewish frame of reference if they were to make themselves understood at all.<sup>65</sup> In his description of the relationship between Judaism and the inchoate Christian church, however, Molitor also suggests that there is a more substantial continuity, and that the

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not consider to be in contradiction what he had written before: ‘[...] ich habe nie anders forschen und denken können als in einem, wenn ich so sagen darf, theologischen Sinn – nämlich in Gemäßheit der talmudischen Lehre von den neunundvierzig Sinnstufen jeder Thorastelle.’ (*GB*, 19-20). In the light of our investigation, it would be interesting to see which results would be yielded by a reassessment of the relationship between metaphysics and materialism in Benjamin’s work – especially now we have proven that some of the groundwork of earlier attempts to do so was either incomplete or simply wrong – but this, unfortunately, lies beyond our present scope.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Einen der stärksten Beweise, daß Christus der Herr allerdings eine hierarchische Ordnung in der neuen Kirche einführt, und den Typus der jüdischen Hierarchie aufs Christenthum übertrug, gehet aus der mystischen Zahl der zwölf Apostel und der siebenzig Jünger deutlich hervor, und erhält in der Offenbarung Johannes noch seine völlige Bestätigung.’ (*MI*, 248n). Obviously, the Catholic Molitor is also implicitly attacking the Protestant conviction that the hierarchic structure of the Catholic church has no foundation in Scripture.

<sup>65</sup> This is in fact a point made by Molitor himself when he states that the Jews never lost the truth or lapsed into positive error: ‘Wie hätte auch der Maschiach bei seinem Erscheinen verstanden werden können, wären das Gesetz, die Propheten und die Tradition ganz vergessen, verdreht und entstellt gewesen?’ (*MI*, 180).

essence of the Jewish doctrine is carried forward into Christianity. He goes to great lengths to refute the (antisemitic) notion that the Jewish tradition had lapsed into 'positive error' and therefore needed to be replaced with a new covenant: 'Hatten etwa damals falsche Lehren die Kirche Jisraäl verdorben, oder unsittliche Principien ihren Weg verkehrt? Nein, keiner Art von positiven Irrthümern kann die alte Kirche beschuldigt werden, weder in den Dogmen, noch in der Sittenlehre [...].'<sup>66</sup> Molitor maintains that Jesus did not attack either the Jewish tradition or the Jewish community, but rather the gross exaggerations of the doctrine, even though these were themselves motivated by piety.<sup>67</sup> He takes the Pharisees as the archetypal example of these 'excesses' of Jewish legalism against which Jesus rebels, but then he proceeds to point out that the tractate *Sota* in the Babylonian Talmud itself distinguishes seven kinds of Pharisaism, condemning false piety and praising the love of God of the true

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<sup>66</sup> 'Had false doctrine spoiled the church of Israel in those days, or had immoral principles twisted its path? No, the old church cannot be accused of any kind of positive errors, neither in its dogmata, nor in its ethics [...].' (M I, 231). Molitor consistently refers to the Jewish religious community as 'die Kirche Jisraäl' or 'die alte Kirche', which to modern ears may sound like a backdating of the term, but the opposite is actually true. In the Septuagint, the term ἐκκλησία is used for the 'assembly' or 'congregation' of the Israelites (Deut. 23:3, Neh. 13:1), and the New Testament use of the term is either a direct reference to this use (as in Acts 7:38) or by analogy to it. The term ἐκκλησία appears only gradually to assume its exclusively Christian meaning, and Molitor's use of its German translation – we may assume that he is not using 'Kirche' in the sense of κῆρυκακον, which refers exclusively to church buildings – to designate the Jewish religious community could be read as another suggestion that the two faiths are very much akin to each other.

<sup>67</sup> The tone of this passage is so apologetic that hardly anything remains to be said even against these alleged 'exaggerations': 'Obwohl der Heiland zwar an verschiedenen Orten, z.B. Matth. 15. 2., ferner 23. 4., wider die Ueberlieferungen und Satzungen der Aeltesten eifert, so auch Paulus an Titus 1. 14., so waren diese Beschuldigungen doch eigentlich nicht gegen die Kirche und ihren wahren Ueberlieferungen gerichtet, sondern nur die großen Uebertreibungen jenes, ursprünglich zwar aus frommer Absicht eingeführten, aber immer drückender gewordenen Seders gemeint, §. 289., welches aber bloß ein menschlicher Mißbegriff, keineswegs aber ein positives Gebrechen der Kirche war.' (M I, 231-232).



*Perushim*. Similarly, Molitor quotes the Talmud to prove that human needs take precedence over a strict legalistic adherence to the commandment of honouring the Sabbath, thus refuting another staple antisemitic argument.<sup>68</sup> This leads him to the general conclusion that the 'true light' of Judaism was merely 'obscured' by the excesses of a few individuals, and that the aim of Jesus was essentially to show the way back to the 'pure doctrine' rather than to destroy Judaism and establish an entirely new religion:

Denn wenn Christus der Herr die allgemeinen Misbräuche rügte, und die Heuchelei einzelner Pharisäer und Kirchenlehrer bestrafte, so redete er doch niemals gegen die Kirche selber. [...] Nein, die Kirche des heiligen Volkes war als solche in keinem Irrthum ; denn wenn auch ihre einzelnen Theologen auf schlechten Wegen wandelten, durch unsittliches Betragen böses Beispiel gaben, oder durch Ueberfüllung des Zeremonial-Gesetzes das Volk zur todten Werkheiligkeit gewöhnten, so waren dieses [sic] blos äußere Flecken, die das reine Licht zwar verdunkelten, aber nicht auszulöschen vermochten. Denn bei allen Makeln ward die reine Lehre nie so verschoben, daß nicht ein reines Gemüth das Aechte vom

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<sup>68</sup> Molitor obviously has a warm affection for the Jews and their tradition, so much so that seems prepared to pay far more attention to their commendable characteristics than to their less palatable sides, as he attributes the kind and broad-minded statements in the Talmud (of which there are indeed many) to Judaism as such, whereas he says that the 'Menge absurder fanatischer Sätze [...], insonderheit rücksichtlich der andern Völker' are the opinions of 'Einzelner, nicht aber der ganzen Kirche [...]' (MI, 233).

Falschen hätte unterscheiden, mithin in dieser Kirche, trotz ihren Mängeln und Mißbräuchen, die Seligkeit hätte erreichen können.<sup>69</sup>

The strongest statement of this hypothesis comes later, however, when Molitor refers to a book by a certain Rittangel in which mention is made of 'gewissen seltenen Büchern' which he claims to have found in Poland and which convinced him that there is not a single 'Titel oder Buchstab im neuen Testament, der nicht in dem Judenthum auch zu finden sey.'<sup>70</sup> In other words, the 'pure doctrine' of which Molitor speaks simply flows into Christianity, and not a word nor even a letter is added to it. Paradoxically, again, this is a particularly Jewish notion. As we discussed in the first chapter, the task of the pious Jew was to preserve and to study the Torah, and not to change or add a single letter to it. The entire Jewish tradition from the Mishnah onwards therefore sees itself not as an addition but as an explanation of the Torah, which was deemed to contain everything already, a concept expressed by the

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<sup>69</sup> 'Because if the Lord Jesus criticised the general abuses and punished the hypocrisy of individual pharisees and church teachers, he never spoke against the church itself. [...] No, the church of the holy people was not in error as such; because if their individual theologians were not walking in the ways of virtue, set a bad example through immoral behaviour, or accustomed the people to a dead, external piety [*Werkheiligkeit*] through an excessive attention to the ceremonial laws, these were merely external stains, which obscured the true light, but could not extinguish it. Because, for all the flaws, the true doctrine was never distorted to such an extent that a pure soul could not have distinguished the real from the wrong, and could therefore have attained beatitude within this church, in spite of its shortcomings and abuses.' (MI, 233-234).

<sup>70</sup> 'Rittangel 226 in seinen hochfeierlichen Solennitäten schreibt auch von gewissen seltenen Büchern, die er an verschiedenen Orten in Polen gefunden und aus denen er sich überzeugt, daß nicht ein Titel oder Buchstab im neuen Testament, der nicht in dem Judenthum auch zu finden sey.' (MI, 301). The fact that Molitor makes his point with reference to an unknown book by an obscure author gives the entire matter a perhaps accidental but undeniably *Borgesian* turn. The life of the Jewish (mystical)

motto 'Turn it over and over, for all is in it.' According to Molitor, this is exactly what Jesus and his followers are doing: 'Bei den Juden hat jedes einzelne Jota der Schrift dasselbe Ansehen, wie das ganze prophetische Wort, und auf diese Heiligkeit der schriftlichen Form scheint auch Christus zu zielen, wenn er spricht, daß kein Jota vom Gesetz solle aufgehoben werden.'<sup>71</sup> They do not add anything to the law, they merely explain it, reviving the 'pure light' that burns within it. This 'pure light', again according to Molitor, is the 'higher mystical tradition' we discussed above, which can be 'obscured' but not 'extinguished.' This higher mystical tradition is essentially the hidden allegorical meaning of the Torah, which, Molitor claims, both Jews and Christians in their different ways are trying to decipher, and it is this mystical tradition which therefore unites both Judaism and Christianity in a very fundamental way. For this tradition not only existed around the time when Jesus preached – as we saw above, Molitor brings Jewish mysticism forward in time by equating it with the oral Torah – Jesus actually referred to it and based his church on it.<sup>72</sup> This is perhaps the most revolutionary statement of *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, and one which Molitor himself proclaims with a semi-messianic air, stating that it has always been true, but that the world has never been ready for it: 'Unsere Behauptung ist also durchaus keine neue, sondern eine alt längst bekannte Idee, die man aber

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tradition is indeed contained entirely in books, and even the oral tradition is usually said to be based on books which have not been preserved.

<sup>71</sup> 'For the Jews, every single iota of the Scriptures is held in the same regard as the whole prophetic word, and Christ too seems to have this sanctity in mind when he says that not one iota of the law should be abolished.' (MI, 371n).

früher, weil ihre Zeit noch nicht gekommen war, niemals gehörig verfolgte, in den neuern Zeiten aber, wo sich der ganze Standpunkt verrückte, völlig fallen ließ.’<sup>73</sup>

This conclusion is relevant to our argument in two rather disparate ways. Firstly because it consistently presents a picture of tradition as a homogeneous sphere, infused by a single *Lehre*. As we pointed out in the previous chapter, and will discuss again later in this chapter, this perspective on tradition is quintessentially Jewish, even if, as in the case of Molitor, it includes such an unorthodox step as the merger of Judaism and Christianity into a single tradition (the paradoxes of such radical unorthodoxy might well have been part of the reason for Scholem’s lifelong fascination with Molitor<sup>74</sup>). Secondly, and more directly related to Benjamin, Molitor’s emphasis on the Jewish character of Christianity may well explain why Benjamin did not always appear to

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<sup>72</sup> ‘[...] und daß mithin Christus selber die Kirche als eine Arcan-Disciplin gestiftet habe. Daß Christus wirklich von der Arcan-Disciplin Gebrauch gemacht, gehet übrigens aus mehreren Stellen der Bibel deutlich hervor; [...]’ (MI, 249-250).

<sup>73</sup> ‘Our claim is thus not at all a novel one, but an idea which has been known since long, which was, however, never properly thought through, as its time had not yet come, and which, in modern times, has been abandoned entirely, as the perspective has shifted.’ (MI, 301-302). There is a distinct sense in which Molitor occasionally assumes the tone of the subject matter he is addressing, much as, as Irving Wohlfarth pointed out, Benjamin believed that he himself was destined to fulfil the messianic role he attributed to the historical materialist, and much as it can be a nearly irresistible temptation to mimic Benjamin’s writing when writing on Benjamin (See Irving Wohlfarth, “Immer radikal, niemals konsequent...”: Zur theologisch-politischen Standortsbestimmung Walter Benjamins’, in *Antike und Moderne: Zu Walter Benjamins ‘Passagen’*, edited by Norbert Bolz and Richard Faber (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1986), 116-137).

<sup>74</sup> See for instance the letter he writes to Salman Schocken in 1937, in which he explains why he has undertaken his Kabbalah studies: ‘Drei Jahre, die für mein ganzes Leben bestimmend geworden sind, 1916-1918, lagen hinter mir: sehr erregtes Denken hatte mich ebensosehr zur rationalsten Skepsis meiner Studiengegenständen gegenüber wie zur intuitiven Bejahung mystischer Thesen geführt, die haarscharf auf der Grenze zwischen Religion und Nihilismus lagen.’ (*Briefe*, vol. I, p. 471). This is yet another indication of the importance Scholem attached to his formative years,

differentiate between Judaism and Christianity whenever he addressed the matter of religion or tradition. It is not entirely implausible that this was a consequence of the impression created by Molitor's monumental attempt to fuse the two religions into one tradition. Furthermore, it would also clarify and in part support Giorgio Agamben's hypothesis that the *Thesen über den Begriff der Geschichte* take their inspiration from the letters of St. Paul.<sup>75</sup> In his discussions of the Jewish influences on Christianity, Molitor frequently mentions Paul in passing, but even in some of the more detailed accounts of these Jewish elements within the (early) Christian church, the name Paul keeps recurring. In his discussion of the methods of the Jewish mystical tradition, Molitor writes :

Diese hohen Geheimnisse der theoretischen und praktischen Kabbalah sind nach der Lehre der jüdischen Mystiker, alle in der Bibel, entweder mit klaren Worten hier und da ausgesprochen ausgesprochen, oder aber meistens in dunkeln Bildern, und geheimnisvollen Winken רמזים (R'masim) blos angedeutet. Der größte Theil der jüdische Mystik beruhet überhaupt auf solchen R'masim, doch nicht allein die jüdische Mystik, sondern auch manche Dogmen des Christenthums, vorzüglich diejenigen, worin gerade das Tiefste enthalten liegt.

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1916-1918, which, as we have seen, were also the years of his most frequent and intensive intellectual exchanges with Walter Benjamin.

<sup>75</sup> Personal communication with Dr. Lieven De Cauter, December 1999. Agamben's thoughts on this matter are yet to be published.

And in a footnote to this paragraph, he adds : ‘Dergleichen Erklärungen der heiligen Schrift aus bloßen R’masim findet man allenthalben in den Evangelien, besonders in den Briefen von Paulus.’<sup>76</sup> Molitor again appears to suggest that the writings of the early Christian church in general, and the letters of Paul in particular, are truly informed and inspired by the Jewish mystical tradition. In fact, towards the end of the first book, Molitor says as much in as many words : ‘Wir werden im Zweiten Theile aus den Schriften von Paulus im Gegentheil viele Stellen anführen, die offenbar aus der Tradition der Juden genommen sind ; so wie denn auch der Heiland, in seinen Reden an das Volk, sich gleichfalls mehrerer Gleichnisse bediente, welche in der jüdischen Tradition vorkommen.’<sup>77</sup> This would entail that even when he referred to

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<sup>76</sup> ‘These high secrets of the theoretical and practical Kabbalah in the Bible are all, according to the teaching of the Jewish mystics, either expressed in clear words here and there, or mostly just indicated with dark images and secretive hints רמזים (R’masim). The largest part of Jewish mysticism rests exclusively on such R’masim, but not just Jewish mysticism, but also many dogmata of Christianity, in particular those in which the deepest meaning is contained. [note :] Such explanations of Scripture from mere R’masim can be found everywhere in the gospels, especially in the letters of Paul.’ (M I, 47-48 ; see also M I, 89 and 104). The description of the esoteric method in this passage is particularly reminiscent of the opening paragraph of Benjamin’s *Einbahnstraße*, where he writes: ‘Meinungen sind für das Riesenapparat des gesellschaftlichen Lebens, was Öl für Maschinen ; man stellt sich nicht vor eine Turbine und übergießt sie mit Maschinenöl. Man spritzt ein wenig davon in verborgene Nieten und Fugen, die man kennen muß.’ (IV, 85). It is quite well-known that Benjamin was fond of secretiveness, and Lieven De Cauter has suggested that he might have considered his own work as an esoteric doctrine (See Lieven De Cauter, *De Dwerg in de Schaakautomaat: Benjamins Verborgene Leer* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1999)). In the light of all the above, there is a great deal to be said for this hypothesis, and we shall return to it in the next chapter.

<sup>77</sup> ‘In the second part, on the contrary, we will quote many passages from the writings of Paul which have clearly been taken from the tradition of the Jews; as the Saviour too, in his addresses to the people, used many parables which occur in the Jewish tradition.’ (M I, 446). In this passage, Molitor refers to another paragraph where he repeats the claim he made earlier, this time from the perspective of the Jewish tradition, and even goes so far as to say that Paul’s ‘presentation and language’ shows ‘the most striking similarity to the midrashim’: ‘Denn in den alten jüdischen Schriften erblickt man ganz dieselbe mystische Weise der Parabeln, Allegorien und R’masim, wie sie in den Büchern des neuen Testamentes, besonders in Paulus vorkommen,

specifically Christian motifs, Benjamin might have been convinced that, from a purely theological point of view, he was essentially talking about the same tradition as the tradition of Judaism. And when in the final chapter we will look closer into Benjamin's treatment and use of the concept of tradition and theology, it will become clear that it may well have been this idea of a homogeneous sphere of *Überlieferung*, tradition – for want of a better translation, which drew him to the work of Molitor and which he himself then drew from that same work.

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dessen Darstellung und Sprache überhaupt die frappanteste Ähnlichkeit mit den Midraschim hat, wie dieses Jeder bezeugen wird, der dieselben nur einigermaßen kennt.' (MI, 305).

### III

As we mentioned before, and will no doubt come to mention again with an increasingly apologetic tone, it is extremely hard to distil one main argument from *Philosophie der Geschichte*, or even to find a definition of tradition as such, let alone an unequivocal one. The four volumes of the book address a wide range of subjects and contain a wealth of information surrounding the Jewish tradition in its various guises and from various angles, so much so, even, that the connections between the four volumes are not always crystal-clear. In this respect, too, the book mimics the tradition it speaks about, giving the impression, whether this is justified or not, that it hides more than it reveals. The first volume is by far the most straightforward, presenting a more or less historical overview of the Jewish tradition in Biblical, Mishnaic, Talmudic and post-Talmudic times, not unlike the overview we presented in the previous chapter (where we have tried to indicate parallel themes and passages in the footnotes). The second volume is arguably the most kabbalist, as it is concerned mainly with theosophy and the speculative knowledge of the Godhead. This volume also introduces the theme of the third and largest volume, namely the critique of revelation. But volume three, curiously enough, also contains two very long chapters on the Jewish doctrines of bodily and spiritual impurities, or *tumoth*, and these chapters paint a meticulously detailed and highly specialised picture of the subject, which did not fail to impress even Gershom Scholem. Volume four, finally, addresses the importance of the Jewish tradition and the Kabbalah for Christianity, and finishes with an



abortive discussion of Christian philosophy. But this overview is of course far from analytic. Molitor writes about a plethora of other subjects, sometimes at the most unexpected moments and with only the most tenuous of links (*Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, as with the tradition that is its subject, is a book for lateral thinkers). This does not make it any easier to trace a clear line through it, as we said before, nor even to distinguish what is of primary and what is of secondary importance. Nevertheless, in this paragraph we will attempt to analyse the most important points made by Molitor with regard to the concept, the phenomenology and the methodology of tradition.

In his brief introduction, Molitor states that ‘Alles in der Welt auf Lehre, Unterricht, Offenbarung und Beispiel beruht’,<sup>78</sup> and with this terse, authoritative statement he has very much set the tone of the book. His analyses, although they are usually supremely knowledgeable and highly insightful, tend to be informed by the very subject about which they are meant to be informative. As we said before, Molitor’s perspective is not that of a detached historicism or scientism, but rather that of an active engagement with tradition, even if this engagement is idiosyncratic, to say the very least. The *dictum* quoted above could easily be accompanied by the statement that ‘Alles in diesem Buch *ist* Lehre, Unterricht, Offenbarung und Beispiel.’ But it is clear that the terseness and authority of Molitor’s tone stems from a real belief in what he is saying. In other words, unlike Benjamin’s use of similar turns of phrase, this is not merely a *Sprachfigur* or *Denkfigur*, a figure of speech or a

figure of thought, there is something of the confessional in all of Molitor's statements – at times brought to the fore by his use of such phrases as 'if God wills' or the eminently Jewish 'the Holy One, blessed be He'.<sup>79</sup> Nonetheless, the forceful tone of these passages shows a remarkable similarity to the tone of Benjamin's early writings, as we will discuss in the next chapter. Yet it is not just the formal similarity between Molitor and Benjamin which may raise academic eyebrows, as there are some surprising analogies with regard to the substance of their writings as well. As we will point out in this paragraph, both Molitor and Benjamin define tradition from the perspective of education or *Erziehung*. Expounding the principles of tradition, Molitor writes:

Die menschliche Kultur, als die Erziehungsanstalt des gefallen  
Menschengeschlechts, hebt ursprünglich von einer unmittelbaren  
göttlichen Offenbarung selber an, und besteht in einer fortlaufenden  
(obwohl durch die Einwirkung des finstern Reiches vielfach entstellten  
und zersplitterten) Reihe von Ueberlieferungen, die in einer lebendig  
fortschreitenden organischen Entfaltung von Geschlecht zu Geschlecht  
übergehen, wobei die folgende Generation immer von der  
vorhergehenden erzogen, und die überlieferten Resultate der  
Vergangenheit die lebendigen Anfänge einer neuen Zukunft werden.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> 'everything in the world rests on doctrine [*\*Lehre*], teaching, revelation and example' (MI, 5)

<sup>79</sup> See for instance MI, 454; MII, 241 or MIII, 598.

<sup>80</sup> 'Human culture, as the educational institution of a fallen human race, originally harks back to an immediate divine revelation, and exists in a continuing series of traditions [*\*Ueberlieferungen*] (although these are often distorted and fragmented through the influence of the dark realm), which go from generation to generation in

‘Human culture exists in a progressing series of *tradenda*’. This is the mode of existence of the *Lehre*, the simultaneous and reciprocal process of *lehren* and *lernen*, of teaching and learning, which cannot be located in either the teacher or the students, but must be seen as an integral, homogeneous sphere of existence – and Benjamin not only knew this, he also said that he needed Molitor’s book ‘*anders kann ich nicht lernen*’.<sup>81</sup> Again, Molitor uses the metaphor of an organic development to convey the image of seamlessness (we already quoted his statement that in history, conceived as tradition, ‘es niemals einen Sprung giebt, daß Alles, was in der Zukunft geschieht, schon in der

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one progressing organic development, whereby the next generation is always educated [*\*erzogen*] by the previous one, and the resulting *tradenda* of the past become the living beginnings of a new future.’ (MI, 5). Every single one of these crucial words concerning education and tradition presents us with a problem in translation. The most obvious word is *Lehre*, which can only translate as ‘doctrine’, but which has a far wider and more abstract meaning in German (or at least, as we will see in the next chapter, it is used in a far wider sense by Molitor, Benjamin and Scholem). The English word ‘tradition’ is the translation for both *Tradition* and *Überlieferung*, the latter of which can also be used in the sense of ‘tradendum’, i.e. a certain element of tradition or ‘something which is handed down’, to use a slightly clumsier paraphrase. The major difference with regard to these words is that *überliefern* can be used as a transitive verb, designating the working of the *Überlieferung*, something which is impossible to say in English. *Erziehung* is again broader than its staple translation ‘education’ or even ‘upbringing’, referring to the guided development of human beings as human beings, rather than being limited to childhood or to academic education (*erziehen* literally means ‘to draw up’). *Offenbarung*, finally, is a special case. It is quite adequately translated by the word ‘revelation’, but it has connotations of both opening up and unveiling which the English translation lacks. Particularly in the case of Benjamin, whose theory of criticism relies heavily on the concepts of veiling and unveiling, this might prove to be of some importance. Unfortunately, we have neither time nor space to discuss this complex yet fascinating aspect of Benjamin’s work.

<sup>81</sup> See note 3 of this chapter. As Benjamin wrote to Scholem in a letter dated 22 October 1917: ‘Aber es ist meine Überzeugung: wer nicht in Kant *das Denken der Lehre selbst* ringen fühlt und wer daher nicht mit äußerster Ehrfurcht ihn mit seinem Buchstaben als ein tradendum, zu Überlieferendes erfaßt (wie weit man ihn auch später umbilden müsse) weiß von Philosophie gar nichts.’ (GB, 389; Benjamin’s emphasis). Benjamin recognized the work of Kant as another sphere of existence for

Vergangenheit wie im Keime vorgebildet ist und sich daraus auf genetische Weise entwickelt.<sup>82</sup>). This metaphor at the same time also suggests that the integrity of tradition is fundamentally maintained. The realm of darkness may distort and fragment the continuous line of tradition, but it can never destroy the *Überlieferungen* themselves. The latter will always survive, albeit possibly in distorted or fragmented forms, so it will always be possible through contemplation and observance to restore tradition to its original form. This concept is reminiscent of the *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, or the breaking of the vessels, a doctrine from the Lurianic Kabbalah which taught that the vessels which contained the glory of the original revelation (the *Kelim*) had been broken and spread across the world to be deciphered and redeemed by the wise and the pious.<sup>83</sup> The importance of this image is the fact that it conceives of the *Überlieferung(en)* as something with a physical reality, a concept which, as we have discussed at length in the first chapter, infuses the entire Jewish tradition, and correspondingly finds its way into *Philosophie der Geschichte*.

One way in which Molitor conveys the concept of the physical reality of tradition is through the comparison of traditional *Erziehung* with artisanship:

Alles Wissen war im Alterthum an das Leben geknüpft, es gab kein blos  
abstraktes theoretisches Wissen: das Wissen war ein Können und

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the *Denken der Lehre selbst*, which means that he too conceived of the *Lehre* as a process which needed a medium. We will discuss this extensively in the next chapter.

<sup>82</sup> *MI*, 302.

<sup>83</sup> See the previous chapter, note 44. Molitor discusses the concept of the *Kelim* with reference to the *Sefirot*, defining the former as the (external) vessels which contain the pure inwardness of the latter (*M II*, 159). See also Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, pp. 291-295.

praktisches Ueben; die Schule eine lebendig-praktische, sittlich-scientifische Bildungsanstalt; die nicht allein die einzelnen Verstandesfrüchte in Anspruch nahm, sondern den ganzen ungetheilten Menschen umfaßte, und mit der Wissenschaft oder Kunst zugleich den Charakter erzog. Daher standen Lehrer und Schüler in dem innig moralischen Verhältniß, wie Vater und Sohn, wie Regent und Diener, zu einander. Lange mußte sich der Schüler am Niedern üben, um den rohen, ungezügelten, natürlichen Menschen zu bändigen, und hierdurch jenen wahren, hehren Ernst, jene Gründlichkeit und reine, innere Liebe für seinen Gegenstand zu gewinnen, ohne welche nirgends ein Gedeihen möglich ist. So schritt alsdann der Lehrling nach und nach zur Stufe eines Gehülfen fort, wo er schon einen weit freiem Wirkungskreis erlangte, bis er zuletzt die Tüchtigkeit des Meisters sich erwarb, und damit die Erlaubnis erhielt, selbst wieder andere Schüler zu unterweisen.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> 'In antiquity, all knowledge was linked to life, there was no such thing as purely abstract knowledge: knowledge was an ability and a practical exercise; school was a living-practical, moral-scientific educational institution, which lay claim not only to the individual fruits of the intellect, but encompassed the whole, undivided person, and built character together with science or art. Therefore, teachers and pupils stood in a very intimate moral relationship to one another, like father and son, like master and servant. The pupil had to practice the humble [side of his art] for a long time, in order to master the rough, unbridled, natural human being, and thus to develop that true, noble gravity, that thoroughness and that pure, inner love of his subject, without which nothing can thrive. Thus the pupil would progress gradually to the stage of an assistant, where he was allowed to work in a wider area, until he finally obtained the competence of the master, and thus was allowed to teach other pupils himself.' (*MI*, 7). Emphasising the similarity of this description with the medieval system of crafts and guilds, Molitor adds in a footnote: 'Nach diesen Prinzipien waren einst die Universitäten, die Zünfte und das Ritterwesen eingerichtet.' (*MI*, 7). In his letters to Scholem in 1917-1918, Benjamin would often state his conviction that this was indeed how education ought to be structured.

This description emphasises the all-encompassing nature of the sphere of *Erziehung* from the perspective of the individual as well as of the activity. Education embraces all aspects of the individual, ‘Wissenschaft,’ ‘Kunst’ and ‘Charakter,’ and it locks both teacher and pupil in a single sphere, an ‘innig moralischen Verhältniß.’ But it also stresses that patient contemplation of the object of study is absolutely instrumental in developing, or rather growing into knowledge, which is ‘ein praktisches Ueben’ rather than a ‘blos abstraktes theoretisches Wissen.’ What is passed on here is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but a ‘knowing’ (*Wissen* as opposed to *Wissenschaft* or *Erkenntnis*) which is most intimately linked to life itself, and which is a process that does not end until life itself ends. The pupil gradually progresses to the stage of an assistant, who, only *zuletzt*, becomes a master. But the task of this master is to teach new pupils and to enter into the same intimate moral relationship with them as his former master did with him. The people will change and pass on, but the tradition which they hand down remains fundamentally the same: the *Lehre* is a sphere of remembrance and commemoration through which all generations pass.<sup>85</sup> Seen from the perspective of tradition, in fact, the *Lehre* is history itself. As Scholem wrote in a diary entry dated 16 October 1916: ‘Im letzten wird sich die historische Skepsis nur vom Judentum aus überwinden, durch den jüdischen Begriff der Tradition. *Das Judentum ist die Historie*

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<sup>85</sup> As we will discuss in the next chapter, Benjamin uses the metaphor of an individual wave in infinite sea to convey the same notion of an all-embracing tradition, into which the individual is immersed and subsumed, almost to the extent that he loses his individuality: ‘Die Lehre ist wie ein wogendes Meer, für die Welle aber (wenn wir sie als Bild des Menschen nehmen) kommt alles darauf an sich seiner Bewegung so hinzugeben, daß sie bis zum Kamm wächst und herüberstürzt mit Schäumen.’ (GB I, 381-382)

*selber*.<sup>86</sup> In book four of *Philosophie der Geschichte*, Molitor, referring back to book one and to the subject of what has now become an almost nameless tradition, reiterates the same idea practically *ipsis verbis*, but with a few interesting modulations:

Wenn nun auch die kirchlich-liturgische Arcan-disciplin ihre frühere Gestalt änderte, so wurde doch die höhere spekulative Mystik fortwährend als eine Art Geheimlehre betrieben und besonders in Klöstern cultivirt, wo sie manchmal auch mit der höhern Naturkunde verbunden war. Allein nicht bloß in der Kirche, sondern auch im gesammten Lebensbereiche des Mittelalters bestand, ähnlich wie im Alterthum, die Arcandisciplin. Denn da es im Mittelalter eben so wenig wie in der alten Welt ein bloß abstrakt-theoretisches Wissen gab, sondern alles Wissen zugleich ein Können und praktisches Ueben war, und mit der Wissenschaft und Kunst zugleich auch der Charakter des Menschen erzogen werden sollte; so wurde der Unterricht in allen Wissenschaften, Künsten und Gewerben durchaus praktisch, und zwar meistens nach mündlicher Ueberlieferung ertheilt, wobei der Lehrer zum Schüler in einem moralischen Verhältnisse wie der Vater zum Sohn, wie der Erzieher zum Eleven stand, daher er denselben erst lange am Rohen und Niedrigen sich üben ließ und ihm nur in dem Maße von den Kunstgeheimnissen mittheilte, als er bei demselben Eifer und Fähigkeit

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<sup>86</sup> 'Ultimately, the historical scepticism will overcome itself only from the perspective of Judaism, through the Jewish concept of tradition. *Judaism is histor(iograph)y itself*.' (Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 1, p. 409; Scholem's emphasis).

für dieselbe fand und solcher sich zugleich durch sittliches Verhalten derselben würdig machte. Die Genossen jeder Kunst hatten also gewisse Geheimnisse unter sich, die sie vor jedem Fremden zu verbergen suchten, und wodurch sie eine geschlossene Corporation bildeten, welche in die naturgemäße Stufenordnung von Lehrlingen, Gesellen und Meistern eingetheilt und auf diese Art organisch in sich gegliedert waren.<sup>87</sup>

The *Lehre* has now not only become connected with higher physics, particularly through the activities of the monasteries – a notion which Umberto Eco has put to spectacular use in *The Name of the Rose*, it has even become detached from the Church as it permeates every aspect of life in the Middle Ages. This is one modification which the concept of the *Lehre* appears to have undergone from book one to book four, becoming, as we said earlier, increasingly nameless. The presence of an unseen *Lehre* now explains the

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<sup>87</sup> ‘But however the ecclesiastical-liturgical esoteric discipline changed its former appearance, the higher speculative mysticism still continued to be exercised as a kind of secret doctrine, cultivated particularly in monasteries, where it was often linked to higher physics. But the esoteric discipline existed not only within the church, but also in the complete sphere of life in the Middle Ages, as it did in Antiquity. For since there was no such thing in the Middle Ages as a merely abstract-theoretical knowing, just as in the ancient world, but all knowing was at the same time a being-able-to and a practical exercising [*note the translation of the same phrase in note 84, which sounds more acceptable to the English ear, but is further from the extremely direct original*], and since the human character was meant to be raised at the same time as science and art, education became thoroughly practical in all sciences, arts and enterprises, and mostly communicated through oral tradition, whereby the teacher stood in a moral relationship to the pupil like the father to the son, like the educator stood to the disciple, which is why he let the latter practise the crude and lowly for a long time and told him of the secrets of the art only in the measure that he found in the student diligence and ability for them and [in the measure that] the student made himself worthy of them through moral behaviour. The initiates of every art thus had certain secrets amongst themselves, which they sought to hide from every stranger, and through which they formed a closed corporation, which was divided according to the



mode of experience of an entire society in a whole era, rather than merely its religious *modus vivendi*. It has, so to speak, become the very air that people breathe, with the air of impossibility of its own non-existence, the same air of which Wittgenstein spoke when he wrote: 'Es gibt gar kein Draußen; draußen fehlt die Lebensluft.'<sup>88</sup> And yet not everybody seemed to have been party to all of this *Arcan-disciplin*, as there were still societies and crafts which only gradually communicated the higher secrets of this esoteric discipline to their members according to a tripartite hierarchy of apprentice, journeyman and master. But because the *Lehre* was the omnipresent defining feature of life in the Middle Ages, *dixit* Molitor, it follows quite naturally that this hierarchy should be *naturgemäß* and *organisch*. Paraphrasing Scholem, we might say: 'Die Lehre ist das Leben selber.'

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natural hierarchy of apprentices, journeymen and masters and which was in this way organically structured in itself.' (MIV, 114-115).

<sup>88</sup> Wittgenstein is discussing the concept of language, context and meaning in the widest possible sense, and much of what he writes in *Philosophische Untersuchungen* can be applied to or illustrated by the concept of tradition as we are discussing it here. But then again, Wittgenstein was Jewish. The paragraph in full reads: 'Das Ideal, in unsern Gedanken, sitzt unverrückbar fest. Du kannst nicht aus ihm heraustreten. Du muß [sic] immer wieder zurück. Es gibt gar kein Draußen; draußen fehlt die Lebensluft. – Woher dies? Die Idee sitzt gleichsam als Brille auf unsrer Nase, und was wir ansehen, sehen wir durch sie. Wir kommen gar nicht auf den Gedanken, sie abzunehmen.' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Werkausgabe*, 8 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), vol. 1, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, § 103, p. 296). The anxiety that speaks from some of Wittgenstein's paradoxes, and indeed from his very writing style in the *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, is often more reminiscent of Kafka than of Russell, and the apodictic and fragmentary paragraphs make the book seem more like a linguistic-logical-mathematical Talmud than a standard philosophical text. In fact, in the second part of *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Wittgenstein himself writes: 'Mathematik ist freilich, in einem Sinne, eine Lehre, - aber doch auch ein *Tun*.' (p. 573). Should we perhaps not extend Scholem's line of *Fortsetzer* of the genuine tradition of language mysticism to include Ludwig Wittgenstein?

In his essay *Der Erzähler*, Benjamin made the same comparison between the dying art of storytelling and craftsmanship as Molitor did in the passages quoted above:

Die Erzählung, wie sie im Kreis des Handwerks – des bäuerlichen, des maritimen und dann des städtischen – lange gedeiht, ist selbst eine gleichsam handwerkliche Form der Mitteilung. Sie legt es nicht darauf an, das pure ‘an sich’ der Sache zu überliefern wie eine Information oder ein Rapport. Sie senkt die Sache in das Leben des Berichtenden ein, um sie wieder aus ihm hervorzuholen.<sup>89</sup>

This short passage highlights the same themes as Molitor’s slightly longer description. Benjamin, too, compares the act of *überliefern* with craftsmanship, this time in a dual sense, because storytelling not only takes place in the sphere of (other) manual labour, it is itself a ‘handwerkliche’ form of communication. This passage is written in Benjamin’s characteristically apodictic style, which tends to tempt the reader into its *Bannkreis* – the word *Kreis* is eminently suitable to describe what Benjamin does and how he does it exactly because it is mercifully vague and yet powerfully eloquent<sup>90</sup> – and which in this case skims over the fact that Benjamin has not given us any reason why the story

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<sup>89</sup> ‘The story, since long flourishing in the sphere of manual labour – agricultural, maritime, and afterwards urban – is itself an equally craftsmanlike form of communication. It does not aim to pass on the pure ‘in itself’ of the matter like a piece of information or a report. It immerses the matter into the life of the narrator, in order to extract it from him [or it] again.’ (II, 447).

should be a 'handwerkliche Form der Mitteilung.' Yet with reference to the quotations from Molitor, this statement becomes clearer. This is of course not to say that Molitor must have been the direct source for this fragment from *Der Erzähler*, but his description of the workings of tradition, in this passage and others, are most remarkably similar to what Benjamin is writing here. The similarity does not end with the analogy of storytelling and craftsmanship. Benjamin also emphasises the fact that more is communicated in the story than mere information or abstract knowledge, that it is most intimately linked to life, as was the knowledge communicated within tradition according to Molitor, in which all knowledge is 'an das Leben geknüpft.'<sup>91</sup> Molitor and Benjamin also

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<sup>90</sup> We will encounter this word again in the next chapter, *leicht entstellt* into the word 'Umkreisen', a similarly vague term describing the only appropriate way in which theological concepts may be approached.

<sup>91</sup> (M I, 7). Elsewhere in book I, in a discussion of the Masorah, Molitor stresses the profound importance of the oral component of tradition, much as the art of narration, to Benjamin, is inextricably linked with the physical presence of the narrator: 'Allein da die Lesung der Bibel, wenn sie auch in Punkten verfaßt war, doch immer Traditions-Sache gewesen, so würde die Berufung auf ein punkirtes Heft der Sache keineswegs mehr Autorität gegeben haben; indem es hier nicht darauf ankam, wie die Punktation, sondern wie die Tradition lautete. Die Punkte waren nur Nebensache, und ehe sie förmlich durch die Masorethen aufgezeichnet, bloß ein subjektives Vehikel der Ueberlieferung, ohne allen objektiven Charakter, §. 19. und §. 464., Daher das lebendige Zeugniß der Lehrer, was die rechte Leseart sey, weit mehr Autorität hatte, als jede schriftliche Versicherung [...] Von einem solchen Glauben an menschliche Treue und Wahrhaftigkeit kann sich freilich unser jetziges philosophisches Zeitalter kaum einen Begriff machen, und doch beruhet die ganze Religion lediglich auf einem solchen Glauben. Denn wenn wir in die mündlichen Ueberlieferungen unserer Vorfahren Zweifel setzen, wie können wir demjenigen vertrauen, was sie uns als schriftliches Wort Gottes hinterlassen haben?' (M I, 392). This quotation, *in nuce*, is what Benjamin's (rather complicated) theory of experience ultimately states, namely that the disappearance of 'traditional' forms of communication such as storytelling are symptomatic of a more profound change in human experience. It is this 'devaluation of experience' ('die Erfahrung ist im Kurse gefallen' II, 439) which makes for an impoverishment of human thought, which now excludes previously valuable experiences, such as the religious experience, as Benjamin explains in *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*. Of course, these are only the roughest possible outlines of Benjamin's thoughts on this matter, but it is nevertheless fascinating to see that he and Molitor both think in similar terms about modern times, albeit with a good hundred years between them, and about the inability of the present

share a focus on the ‘Gegenstand’ of the *Erziehung* or the ‘Sache’ of the *Erzählung*. The pupil must be forced to contemplate his object for a long time in order to develop ‘eine innere Liebe für seinen Gegenstand [...] ohne welche nirgends ein Gedeihen möglich ist,’ and the storyteller must allow his object to sink into his life before he can extract it again, and tell his (and its – the German is ambiguous) story.<sup>92</sup> It is quite interesting in this context that Benjamin regularly used the word *Versenkung* to refer to a deep contemplation, from *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (which was *entworfen* 1916, a year which ought to have a ring of familiarity by now) to the *Passagen-Werk*, but we will return to this subject in the next chapter.

The concept of tradition, *Tradition* or *Überlieferung*, as it comes across in *Philosophie der Geschichte*, is the same homogeneous space of the *Lehre* which we have discussed in the previous chapter. Teacher and pupil, *Lehrende* and *Lernende*, pass through this sphere as they pass it on to the next generation. Yet if the *tradentes*, they who pass on, are less than permanent, the *tradenda*, or the things passed on, are given an increased sense of reality, so much so that they are referred to and treated almost as physical entities (and interestingly enough, the *tradentes* only acquire a tangible reality to the student of tradition when they become themselves *tradenda*, subjects or objects of the stories that

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‘philosophisches Zeitalter’ to grasp the fullness of (religious) experience which the past was able to.

<sup>92</sup> It may well be a complete coincidence, but both Benjamin and Molitor basically state the same conditions under which *überliefern* can thrive – they both use the term *gedeihen* (and the words *Kreis* and *Leben* in the same sense). Because the quotation from Molitor is so near the beginning of the first book, on page 7, it is tempting to think that Benjamin may be paraphrasing from memory, especially since the subject matter of *Der Erzähler* is so uncannily akin to Molitor’s descriptions of tradition, as we will see in subsequent paragraphs. *Si non é vero...*

carry tradition). In *Der Erzähler*, Benjamin referred to the subject matter of the storyteller as ‘den Rohstoff der Erfahrungen’ which he had to work on, *bearbeiten*, ‘auf eine solide, nützliche und einmalige Art.’<sup>93</sup> The metaphor of storytelling as craftsmanship is simply taken through to its logical consequences: if the storyteller is a craftsman, he must have materials to work with. The same is true in the case of Molitor’s metaphor: if the act and the sphere of tradition, *Überlieferung*, is like a craft, the materials of this craft, the *Überlieferungen*, must be at hand.

The act and art of *Überlieferung*, or tradition, is ultimately *Lehre*, or study, in the widest possible sense of the word. As Hillel said to the gentile who wanted to learn the whole of Torah while standing on one leg: ‘That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and study.’<sup>94</sup> This apodictic command, a version of *Talmud Torah*, embraces every aspect of life, and Molitor seemingly feels he cannot overemphasise this unity of experience:

Im Alterthum aber war der äußere und innere Mensch, mithin die äußere Legalität und innere Moralität nicht so scharf wie bei uns geschieden, daher flossen beide auch mehr in einander über, und keinem gläubigen Jisraäliten der alten Zeit fiel es ein, die doktrinelte Tradition vom Gesetz so scharf trennen zu wollen, sondern es wurde als Pflicht eines jeden

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<sup>93</sup> ‘the raw material of experiences, [which he has to] work on in a solid, useful and unique way’ (II, 464).

<sup>94</sup> B. Shabbat 31a.

Jisraäliten angesehen, sich mit der Seele des Gesetzes ebensowohl, als mit dem Leib desselben vertraut zu machen.<sup>95</sup>

The 'soul' of the law is communicated by Hillel in his first terse phrase, 'That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour'; the 'body' of the law, on the other hand, is the overwhelming and ever-increasing textual corpus which gravitates around (unspoken) phrases like these. Of course, paradoxically enough, Hillel's semi-revelatory statement of the soul of the law automatically becomes part of its body by the sheer fact that it has been written (even though it is written as something which has been said<sup>96</sup>). It is this paradox which lies at the root of Jewish mysticism, or indeed any mysticism *pur sang*, namely the tension between infallible meaning and fallible form, between the universal and the particular, between the eternal and the historical. One solution to this paradox, requiring either an essentially unthinking leap of faith or – which is far more fascinating – an intense logical concentration and some conceptual stuntwork, is to make the particular a universal. In other words, and this phrase

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<sup>95</sup> 'In Antiquity, the outer and inner man, and therefore the outer legality and inner morality, were not separated as sharply as with us, and thus both flowed into each other to a greater degree, and it occurred to no believing Israelite of the old age to want to divorce the doctrinal tradition from the law so sharply, but it was seen as the duty of every Israelite to make himself conversant with the soul of the law as well as with the body.' (MI, 39).

<sup>96</sup> Gershom Scholem was well aware of this paradox, as he writes in his diary on 24 March 1918: 'Aber das ist es ja: an meiner Arbeit ist das Wesentliche ja gerade die *mündliche Lehre*, das persönliche (!! ) Verhältnis der Menschen in der Lehre, und hiervon läßt sich nicht mehr niederschreiben als eigentlich nur die *Methode*. Denn alles andere würde geschrieben eine Paradoxie enthalten wie alle geschriebene Tradition.' (*Tagebücher*, vol. 2, p. 157). This statement has a counterpart in Benjamin's correspondence, namely in his constant insistence that there are certain things about which it is better to speak face to face than to write, as he says in a letter dated June 1917: 'Doch von diesen Dingen ist es besser reden als schreiben.' (GB I, 363; see also GB I, 358, 391, 402-403, 409, 414, 418-419, 428, 436, 441 and 488).

now becomes increasingly significant, to make language itself divine. It is now the very materiality of language which makes it divine, the one aspect which seemingly prevented it from being so. And this, as we discussed in the previous chapter, is perhaps the most crucial idiosyncrasy of the already unique Jewish tradition: it invests the form with meaning to such an extent that meaning without form becomes inconceivable. This has immensely far-reaching consequences for the way language is read, studied and, quite literally, handled. One of the examples Molitor gives through which this linguistic and intellectual *tour de force* is performed is the contemplation of the holy name, through which the kabbalist is able to purify and sanctify himself and the world. This could be achieved

[...] durch ein andächtiges Versenken der Seele in die Anschauung der heiligen Namen; denn da die Charaktere der Schriftzüge, wie die Kabbalisten sagen, die lebendigen sichtbaren Ausdrücke der göttlichen Kräfte selber sind, und das Obere sich stets dem Untern öffnet, wenn dieses sich jenem gleichförmig macht: so wird die Seele durch ein solches Versenken in die Anschauung jener geheimnißvollen Formen dermaßen in den Abdruck vergestaltet, daß sich ihm der obere Typus selber erschließt.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> '[...] through a devout immersion of the soul in the contemplation of the holy name; because as the characters of the lettering, as the kabbalists say, are the living, visible expressions of the divine powers themselves, and the higher always opens itself to the lower when the latter makes itself equiform to the former, the soul becomes \*transformed [*vergestaltet*] in the imprint through such an immersion in the contemplation of these mysterious forms to such an extent that the higher type itself reveals itself to it.' (MI, 45-46).

In this quotation, the concept of *Versenkung*, which we pointed out earlier, appears in the context of the immersion into the sphere of language, and more particularly the divine name. As we will discuss in the next chapter, this is perhaps the most crucial aspect of Benjamin's thinking on language, tradition and intoxication, uniting these three seemingly disparate phenomena. Furthermore, it should be noted that the 'obere Typus' reveals itself to the soul after the latter has immersed itself within language and has gone up into the 'Abdruck'; or in Benjamin's words, truth is an intentionless being which cannot be attained by the predatory intellect, but only through receptive contemplation. This quotation, however, is a perfect illustration of the logical consequences of a mystical approach to language. The 'Charaktere der Schriftzüge' are the 'lebendigen sichtbaren Ausdrücke' of the divine powers. In other words, language is not conceived of in a duality of the living and inner meaning and the outer but essentially dead or lifeless form. The very characters, rather, are alive: 'Denn die äußere Formen sind keineswegs blos etwas gleichgültig Todtes, wie der flache Unglaube gewöhnlich behauptet'.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> 'Since the outer forms are not just something indifferently dead, as the shallow unbeliever usually claims' (MI, 47). Molitor is caught in quite a difficult position, as he finds himself defending an eminently Jewish conception of language, and one to which the standard Christian is in many ways diametrically opposed (particularly the, albeit protestant, concept of *sola fides*, which emphatically puts meaning above form). Apparently loath to pledge allegiances either way, Molitor thus again ends up with a paradox: 'Unlängbar hat die praktische Kabbalah einen tiefen Grund; doch ist nicht in Abrede zu stellen, daß von Juden und Christen mit derselben viel Aberglauben und Unfug getrieben worden, absonderlich weil die unwissende Menge in dem Wahne befangen war: die geschriebene Worte seyen Alles; da doch diese die bloßen Träger sind, und in der Seele und in dem Glauben allein die lebendigmachende Kraft liegt, wie dieß [*sic*] von allen ächten Kabbalisten einstimmig gelehrt wird. Doch ist die Grenzlinie zwischen dem wahren Glauben und dem Aberglauben sehr fein und zart, und daher der Irrthum gar zu leicht möglich. Denn die äußern Formen sind keineswegs



The second half of the quotation is particularly mystifying. The soul, through an immersion in the contemplation of the form of language – which means individual letters or even parts of letters, becomes ‘vergestaltet in den Abdruck’. The prefix *ver-* to the otherwise perfectly normal word *gestalten* can indicate a direction, a completion, an amplification or a transformation, which suggests that the soul is transported or transformed into the *Abdruck*, or consumed and completed by the *Abdruck*, i.e. the ‘mark’ or ‘imprint’, in other words, the *form* of language. It is this form of thinking to which Benjamin, too, refers when he writes about the ‘Oberflächenwelt des Ornaments’ or about the Chinese artist who disappears into his own painting.<sup>99</sup> The form is granted an objectivity which, although heading in a very similar direction, goes far beyond even the most formalistically formulated aesthetic or poetic function of language, because it is *theological*. Benjamin’s project was to import this

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blos etwas gleichgültig Todtes, wie der flache Unglaube gewöhnlich behauptet, sondern in denselben liegt allerdings eine wirkliche, obwohl blos äußere erregende, und daher keine innere heiligmachende Kraft.’ (MI, 46-47). It is quite clear that this statement does not sit entirely comfortably with the previous quotation, in which a greater emphasis is put on the very real mystical force of language in the holy name. One way of treating such contradictions, as Benjamin himself was wont to do, is to suspend the contradiction in a constellation, but even though the effect of Molitor’s paradoxical statements is such, it is rarely overtly stated as his intention (this, of course, may be due to the fact that Molitor remains a believer, and thus can resolve paradoxes, rather facilely, one might say, with a leap of faith. The fact that Benjamin does not resolve his paradoxes, but cultivated them, is also the strongest argument *against* the hypothesis, or Scholem’s wishful thinking perhaps, that Benjamin believed in God).

<sup>99</sup> In the tenth of Benjamin’s *Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen*, recording his experiment with opium, Benjamin writes: ‘Es gibt keine nachhältigere Legitimation des crocks [*Benjamin’s name for opium*] als das Bewußtsein, mit seiner Hilfe auf einmal, in jene versteckteste, im allgemeinen unzugänglichste Oberflächenwelt einzudringen, welche das Ornament darstellt. [...] Eshandelt sich dabei einmal um die Mehrsinnigkeit des Ornaments. Es gibt keins, das sich nicht mindestens von zwei verschiedenen Seiten ansehen ließe, nämlich als Flachengebilde oder aber als lineare Konfiguration. [...] Es wird an anderer Stelle darauf hinzuweisen sein, daß diese vielfältige Interpretierbarkeit, die ihr Urphänomen im Ornament hat, nur eine andere Seite der

*theologoumenon* into the sphere of the profane and still make it work, evoking *profane Erleuchtung*. As paradoxical as this may sound, even Molitor was aware that this was not impossible:

[...] überhaupt schrieben die Alten nur wenig, dieses Wenige aber mußte den Charakter der expressiven Objektivität an sich tragen. Daher nahmen sie bei alles was sie schrieben, selbst im Profanen, auf die Form Rücksicht, die bei den Orientalen mystischer, bei den Occidentalen aber mehr ästhetischer Art war, aber überall dasselbe Princip der Objektivität zum Grunde hatte.<sup>100</sup>

This 'objectivity' should be taken very literally indeed. It means that real meaning inheres in language, rather than language merely serving as a proxy or a formal representation of an ideal and absent meaning.<sup>101</sup> In other words,

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eigentümlichen Identitätserfahrung darstellt, die der *crock* eröffnet.' (VI, 603-604). We will come back to the importance of these *Protokolle* in the next chapter.

<sup>100</sup> '[...] the ancients wrote only little, but the little they did write had to bear the character of expressive objectivity. This is why they took the form in consideration of all they wrote, even in the profane domain, which [form] was of a mystical nature with the orientals, but of a more aesthetic nature with the occidentals, yet everywhere had the same principle of objectivity as its basis.' (MI, 54). Note that Molitor also sees a great kinship between the mystical and the aesthetic from the perspective of form.

<sup>101</sup> This automatically leads us to the Saussurean principle of the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relationship, which, interestingly enough, the mystical view on language would not *automatically* exclude or deny. Admittedly most language mysticism tends to adhere to the belief in a created language which must thus necessarily be overdetermined, but it is not impossible to insist that the materiality of language can have a real and systematisable meaning (rather than systematised) while maintaining that the relationship between signifier and signified need not be motivated. The prime example of this is probably Mallarmé's vowel-colour poetry, which in fact amounts to subjective mysticism. In the Jewish tradition, too, the non-arbitrary nature of the signifier-signified relationship can never be used *a priori*, but must always follow as an *a posteriori* coda when the case for a certain argument has already been made. In other words, anyone who would want to state the divine origin

language is not just a metaphor, and neither is the metaphor of its own objectivity or materiality just a metaphor.<sup>102</sup> From the perspective of the Jewish tradition, as we discussed at length in the previous chapter, and as *Philosophie der Geschichte* confirms, language has a distinct and emphatic objective reality: the aim is not to go beyond or over it, or to by-pass it in some way; the aim is, as Molitor says, to go *through* it and to immerse oneself *in* it. The objectivity of language as the object of study, which is in its turn the essence of tradition, has thus established itself as the very sphere of tradition, and has assumed the same characteristics as tradition, namely a distinct spatial and material reality. In fact, it could also be said that the concept of the spatial and material reality of tradition derives from a certain way of thinking about language as its medium or mode of existence. And this, we feel, is what Benjamin attempted to do in *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache*

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of a certain word must first find reasons why this should be so, and these reasons invariably come from the text or from language itself, never actually *directly* from God. Or as Laplace once memorably said: 'Sire, je n'ai pas besoin de cette hypothèse.'

<sup>102</sup> Molitor's language mysticism is quite reminiscent of Mallarmé's, which we mentioned in the previous note, but its dynamic, or we might even say dialectic – in the Benjaminian sense – is remarkably close to what Benjamin writes on the evolution of the *reine Sprache*, which will eventually become music, in *Aufgabe des Übersetzers*: 'Die Worte sind Ausdrücke von Begriffen. Die Worte werden aus Vokal- und Consonanttönen gebildet, die an sich selber noch keinen gestalteten Begriff oder Gedanken, sondern blos die verschiedenen Arten von Gefühlen und Empfindungen bezeichnen. Das Gefühl verhält sich zu dem Gedanken, wie das Qualitative der innern, zum Quantitativen der Außenwelt. Der Gedanke quillt aus dem Gefühl; das Denken ist der Akt der Gestaltung, wodurch die Innerlichkeit und Unendlichkeit des Fühlens zur Endlichkeit und objektiven Aeüßerlichkeit des Begriffs heraus gebildet [sic] wird. So wie überhaupt die Einheit und Innerlichkeit das Ursprüngliche, die Entfaltung in äußeren Gegensätzen, das hervorgegangene Geoffenbarte ist, so verhält es sich auch in der Sprache; wo das Gefühl das Ursprüngliche, der Begriff aber das Secundäre bezeichnet. Es walten also auch in der Sprache zwei Principien ob, das des Denkens und das des Gefühls, oder das logische und musikalische Princip, da letzteres den Grund von ersterem enthält.' (MI, 357-358).

*des Menschen*, and beyond, and it will be the subject of our third and final chapter.

The paradoxical figure of the understated apocalypse informs Benjamin's work on many levels. In the essay on Kafka, he uses it in the section entitled '*das bucklicht Männlein*', a story about the hunchbacked dwarf from a folk song, who, according to Benjamin, represents the form the world assumes '*im Vergessen*', i.e. in an unredeemed state ('*Die Welt im Stande des Vergessenseins ist entstellt*'<sup>1</sup>). He writes: '*Dieses Männlein ist der Insasse des entstellten Lebens; es wird verschwinden, wenn der Messias kommt, von dem ein großer Rabbi gesagt hat, daß er nicht mit Gewalt die Welt verändern wolle, sondern nur um ein Geringes sie zurechtstellen werde.*'<sup>2</sup> This 'micrological messianism' continues to appear in Benjamin's work, most famously in the *Thesen über den Begriff der Geschichte*, which open with the hunchbacked dwarf in the chess machine and close with the statement, or rather doctrine – in the purest sense of the word, that every second is the narrow gate through which the Messiah may enter. In the context of the tense kinship between Judaism and Christianity, whereby the latter is seen as a *leichte Entstellung*, rather than *Zurechtstellung*, of the former, the very concept of the Messiah becomes profoundly ambiguous, even uncanny, as the messianic world is no longer the same world which the hopeful wanted to see redeemed.<sup>3</sup> It is the

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<sup>1</sup> 'The world in the state of forgetfulness is distorted.' (II, 1239).

<sup>2</sup> 'This little man is the inhabitant of the distorted life; he will disappear when the Messiah comes, of whom a great rabbi said that he would not change the world with violence, but would only adjust it ever so slightly.' (II, 432).

<sup>3</sup> According to Molitor, however, the promise – or threat, depending on one's perspective – of a small yet fundamental change in the law was always inherent within the law itself: '*Die Aenderung des Gesetzes in den Tagen des Maschiachs wird in den*

awareness of this which lies at the root of the anxiety that infuses Kafka's world, and which forces Benjamin into the paradox of his *Dialektik im Stillstand*, or the messianic revolution as permanent suspension.

The anonymous story of the Messiah who would put the world to right ever so slightly occurs twice in the copious notes Benjamin made in preparation for his essay on Kafka, and in both cases, it appears to be the perfect example of such a 'nameless tradition' of which we spoke in the first chapter. The first note emphasises the anonymity of the story: 'Daß der Begriff der Entstellung in der Darstellung Kafkas eine doppelte Funktion hat, und welche zeigt jene jüdische Überlieferung, nach der die Welt durch die Ankunft des Messias nicht etwa durch und durch verändert sondern nur in allem "ein klein wenig" anders werden soll als sie war.'<sup>4</sup> In the second note, Benjamin links the messianic theme to the *entstellte* figures in Kafka's work, Odradek, the *Katzenlamm* or Gregor Samsa in *Die Verwandlung*: 'Sie sind entstellt, wie es die Welt für jenen Rabbi war, der lehrte, das [sic] das Kommen des Messias sie nicht durch und durch verändere; "Er rückt sie nur zurecht" lehrte er.'<sup>5</sup> A Jewish tradition,

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jüdischen Kirche selber gelehrt, wie dieses aus dem Sohar, den Midraschim und dem Thalmud erhellt. Wenn also im Christenthum das alte Gesetz von Sinai modificirt worden, so stehet solches mit der jüdischen Glaubenslehre in gar keinem Widerspruche; die Juden können also mit Recht der christlichen Kirche nicht den Vorwurf machen, daß sie willkürlich ohne Grund verfahren, und blos den Heiden zu gefallen das Gesetz verändert hätte. Was übrigens von Seiten der christlichen Kirche aus dem Judenthum beibehalten und was aufgehoben wurde, beruhet keineswegs auf blos äußeren zufälligen Beweggründen, sondern auf tiefen wesentlichen Principien, die größtentheils alle in der mystischen Theologie des Judenthums selber ihren Grund haben.' (MI, 244n).

<sup>4</sup> 'That the concept of distortion in Kafka's presentation has a double function, and which one, is shown by the Jewish tradition, according to which the world would not be changed through and through by the coming of the Messiah, but all in all would only become "slightly different" from how it was.' (II, 1200).

<sup>5</sup> 'They are distorted, as the world was for the rabbi who taught that the coming of the Messiah would not change it through and through; "he merely straightens it" he taught.' (II, 1239).

a certain rabbi or even a great rabbi : the actual source of this story seems deliberately untraceable. That, after all, is the essence of tradition : it is always already there. But in this particular case, something slightly more prosaic may well be going on. In a letter dated 24 June 1929, an almost audibly exhausted and bitter Benjamin writes to Scholem : ‘Demnächst erscheinen zwei neue Bücher von Bloch “Spuren” und “Essays”, in denen ein nicht geringer Teil meiner unsterblichen Werke, z.T. etwas ramponiert, der Nachwelt überkommt.’<sup>6</sup> There is little novelty in Benjamin’s claim that Ernst Bloch constantly stole his ideas, and skimming through *Spuren* in particular, that claim does not come across as entirely implausible. Yet there is one passage in particular, from the fragment entitled ‘Die Glückliche Hand’, which is quite thought-provoking in the present context. Bloch writes :

Und ein anderer Rabbi, ein wirklich kabbalistischer, sagte einmal : um das Reich des Friedens herzustellen, werden nicht alle Dinge zu zerstören sein und eine ganze neue Welt fängt an; sondern diese Tasse oder jener Strauch oder jener Stein und so alle Dinge sind nur ein wenig zu verrücken. Weil aber diese Wenige so schwer zu tun und sein Maß so schwierig zu finden ist, können das, was die Welt angeht, nicht die Menschen, sondern dazu kommt der Messias. Dabei hat auch dieser weise Rabbi, mit seinem Satz,

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Shortly two new books by Bloch will appear, *Spuren* and *Essays*, in which not a small part of my immortal works, in part somewhat battered, is passed on to posterity.’ (GB III, p. 469).

nicht der krauchenden Entwicklung, sondern durchaus dem Sprung des glücklichen Blicks und der glücklichen Hand das Wort geredet.<sup>7</sup>

This passage conveys the same concept of the ‘understated apocalypse’, as we have called it, and attributes it to the same mysterious rabbi, this time described as ‘a great kabbalist’. In a way, this is not too far from the truth. In a letter dated 30 January 1978 to Michael Landmann on the subject of the latter’s manuscript entitled ‘Das Judentum bei Ernst Bloch’, Scholem is quite scathing in his criticism of Bloch, stating that Landmann has not merely overseen or ignored Bloch’s weaknesses, but that he has understated them. And on one subject in particular, Scholem’s commentary is exceptionally enlightening : ‘Der Autor, der, wie sie sagen von Bloch (wie ja auch von Benjamin, Adorno und anderen) zitierten Bemerkung über den Messias – in den “Spuren” einem “wahrhaft kabbalistischen Rabbi” zugeschrieben –, war kein anderer als ich!! Es ist wohl der erfolgreichste apokryphe Satz, mit dem ich in die neueste Philosophie eingegangen bin. (Ich habe ihn 1916 in einem Gespräch mit Benjamin erfunden, als Gegengewicht gegen Benjamin’s Vorliebe, Sätzen mit den Worten zu beginnen : Es ist eine metaphysische Wahrheit, daß...).’<sup>8</sup> It is

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<sup>7</sup> ‘And another rabbi, a true kabbalist, once said: in order to restore the realm of peace, all things are not to be destroyed [before] a whole new world will begin; but this cup or that bush or that stone and all things likewise are only to be moved a little bit. But because this little bit is so hard to do and its measure so hard to find, people cannot do it, as far as the world is concerned, but the Messiah will come to do it. Thereby, too, this wise rabbi, in one word, had spoken not of the crawling development, but of the leap of the fortunate look and the fortunate hand.’ (Ernst Bloch, *Spuren* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 201-202).

<sup>8</sup> ‘The author of the remark about the Messiah, quoted, as you say, by Bloch (as by Benjamin, Adorno and others as well) – attributed in *Spuren* to a “truly kabbalist rabbi – was none other than me!! It is no doubt the most successful apocryphal sentence with which I have gone down into modern philosophy. (I invented it in 1916 in a



quite fascinating to find that Benjamin actually immortalised this tendency in 1916, in the essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, where he writes: 'Es ist eine metaphysische Wahrheit, daß alle Natur zu klagen begönne, wenn Sprache ihr verliehen würde.'<sup>9</sup> A great deal still remains to be said about the prophetically declamatory tone of Benjamin's writing in general and of this essay in particular, but we shall leave this to our final chapter.

If we recall Scholem's letter to Siegfried Lehmann, quoted above, in which he said that everyone from Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our teacher, to 'mister Lehmann himself', if he wanted to, were a part of the Jewish tradition, or rather *are* the Jewish tradition, this philological *trouvaille* throws a very small, but very meaningful light on Benjamin's relationship with this Jewish tradition.

Benjamin's nameless source quoted in the essay on Kafka turns out to be the

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conversation with Benjamin, as a counterbalance to Benjamin's predilection to start sentences with the words "it is a metaphysical truth that..." (Gerschom Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. III, pp. 173-174). In a letter dated 9 July 1934, written in response to the Benjamin's manuscript of the abovementioned *Kafka*-essay, Scholem already reminded his friend who the author of the 'remark about the Messiah' was: 'Und eine Frage: von wem stammen nun eigentlich diese vielen Erzählungen: hat Ernst Bloch sie von Dir oder Du von ihm? Der auch bei Bloch erscheinende große Rabbi mit dem tiefen Diktum über das messianische Reich *bin ich selber*; so kommt man noch zu Ehren!! Es war eine meinern ersten Ideen über die Kabbala.' (Gerschom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel: Vierzehn Aufsätze und kleine Beiträge* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), p. 195; see also *GB IV*, 463). With his characteristic, now slightly cheeky secretiveness, Benjamin replied to Scholem's question as follows: 'Dies für heute. Denn die Herkunft der Geschichten aus dem "Kafka" bleibt mein Geheimnis, das zu lüften Dir nur bei persönlicher Anwesenheit gelingen würde, wo ich Dir dann allerdings noch eine ganze Anzahl gleich schöner versprechen könnte.' (*GB IV*, 461). In the letter to Landmann quoted above, Scholem denies Bloch's claim, made in the nineteen-sixties, that he acquired all his knowledge of the Kabbalah from conversations with Scholem, conversations which the latter said never took place, adding: 'Aber so war Bloch nun mal.' (p. 173). This also sheds a different light on the plagiarism controversy between Bloch and Benjamin, suggesting that Bloch did actually hear the story of the 'understated apocalypse' from Benjamin, which in turn lends greater credence to the latter's claim that Bloch consistently stole his best ideas.

<sup>9</sup> 'It is a metaphysical truth that all of nature would begin to wail when language would be bestowed upon it.' (II, 155).

most often-named source of his knowledge of the Jewish tradition. And by incorporating the story as an anonymous but ancient tale, Benjamin, with a characteristically midrashic overdetermination, has in fact captured the essence of being in the Jewish tradition as an intimate coexistence of past and present, where a seventeenth-century rabbi can hold discussions with the prophet Jeremiah, or where an eighteen-year-old Jewish student drinking coffee in a Berlin room can become 'a great Rabbi'. In those days, Benjamin and Scholem were not so much talking about the Jewish tradition as talking in the Jewish tradition. Nicht *durch*, sondern *in*.

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BENJAMIN

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By the spring of 1917, Gershom Scholem's knowledge of classical Hebrew had reached such levels that he was able to earn some money by teaching Hebrew and translating books from Yiddish and Hebrew into German. The one text he chose as his starting point to confront the rather more daunting task of translating from German into Hebrew, however, was Walter Benjamin's *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* :

In den Monaten vor [Benjamins] Heirat beschäftigte ich mich einige Zeit mit dem Versuch, Teile aus der mir sehr nahegehenden Arbeit über die Sprache, in der auch Motive aus unseren Gespräche in Seeshaupt aufgenommen waren, ins Hebräische zu übersetzen. Benjamin wollte unbedingt, daß ich ihm die ersten Seiten, die ich geschrieben hatte, vorlese, um den Klang seiner Sätze in der, wie er halb scherzhaft sagte, 'Ursprache' zu hören.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'During the months before his marriage, I occupied myself with the attempt to translate into Hebrew parts of the work on language, which affected me deeply and in which motives from our conversations in Seeshaupt had been incorporated. Benjamin insisted that I should read him the first pages which I had written, in order to hear the sound of his sentences, as he said half jokingly, in the "original language".' (Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 53).

This quotation, describing what to all intents and purposes looks like harmless intellectual *Spielerei*, can actually be read as a monad, a single, hypertropic event from which the whole of Benjamin's engagement with the Jewish tradition unfolds. It was around this time that Benjamin started studying Molitor, prompted, as we said in the previous chapter, by his intensive discussions with Scholem. It was a letter from Scholem which provoked Benjamin's extraordinary outburst of creativity in November 1916, leading him to write an eighteen-page reply which then became *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, a piece in which Benjamin intends 'mich mit dem Wesen der Sprache auseinander zu setzen und zwar – soweit ich es verstehe: in immanenter Beziehung auf das Judentum und mit Beziehung auf die ersten Kapitel der Genesis.'<sup>2</sup> This essay, as we will discuss in this final chapter, is itself in many ways at the heart of Benjamin's thinking about language, theology and Judaism, and it would remain so for more than twenty years. It therefore seems only fitting that it should be this text which Scholem decided to use in order to practice his budding translation skills, not least because *Über Sprache* at one point addresses the concept of translation as something which needs to be grounded 'in der tiefsten Schicht der Sprachtheorie', in the deepest layer of language theory.<sup>3</sup> It seems only fitting

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<sup>2</sup> '[...] to think about the essence of language, and more precisely – insofar as I understand: in an immanent relationship to Judaism and with reference to the first chapters of Genesis.' (GB I, 343).

<sup>3</sup> 'Es ist notwendig, den Begriff der Übersetzung in der tiefsten Schicht der Sprachtheorie zu begründen, denn er ist viel zu weittragend und gewaltig, um in irgendeiner Hinsicht nachträglich, wie bisweilen gemeint wird, abgehandelt werden zu können.' (II, 151). In its 'companion essay', *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, Benjamin does indeed ground the concept of translation in the deepest layers of language theory. This essay, to which Benjamin referred in a curriculum vitae of 1940 as 'den ersten

that the text should find its way into Hebrew, the holy language; and it seems only fitting that Benjamin insisted on hearing its sounds, even though, or perhaps because, he did not understand the words.

The question of the 'jüdischer Gehalt' of Benjamin's writings, and what form it could possibly take, despite 'seiner ziemlich totalen Unwissenheit in jüdischen Dingen'<sup>4</sup>, as Scholem himself concedes, has daunted and divided commentators for a very long time. It has prompted some of them, like Menninghaus, to give up on the matter entirely, ruling out anything but the most superficial, incidental and mostly anecdotal influence. But as Rabbi Tarfon used to say: 'If thou hast studied much Torah, thou shalt be given much reward.' (*M. Avot*: II, 16). This approach, unsurprisingly perhaps, also seems to lie closest to Scholem's heart, as he once explained the importance of the Jewish tradition to Benjamin's work as follows:

Wenn wir nach dem jüdischen Element in diesem Menschen und seiner Produktion fragen, so entspricht es gerade dem vertrackten Wesen Walter Benjamins, daß, was ihm als Grund seines Wesens und zugleich oft als Ziel seines Denkens sehr bewußt war, das Jüdische, in seinem Werk fast nur in Obertönen zu vernehmen ist, freilich an sehr sichtbaren Stellen dieses Werkes, wie etwa dem Prospekt zu der von ihm geplanten

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Niederschlag meiner sprachtheoretischen Reflexionen' (IV, 891), Benjamin further develops the concepts of the 'reine Sprache' and the unfolding of language according to the messianic triad paradise – fall – redemption. There are again quite a number of remarkable similarities between this essay and Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte*, but the usual limitations force us to defer their discussion to another project.

<sup>4</sup> 'His almost complete ignorance of things Jewish' (Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, p. 75).

Zeitschrift 'Angelus Novus' oder den geschichtsphilosophischen Thesen, seiner letzten Arbeit. Aber dahinter steckt viel mehr.<sup>5</sup>

'Aber dahinter steckt viel mehr.' That might have been the motto for this final chapter, because the influence of the Jewish tradition on and in Benjamin's work should be sought in the style and form of his writings as much as in their content. As we will venture to show in the following sections on *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* and *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, it is the Jewish concept of the divine, the doctrine of God and his name – *theology* in the purest sense of the word, which inspires these texts and which therefore also heavily determines the concepts of language and meaning, truth and tradition which Benjamin seeks to define in them. The importance of these two essays lies in the fact that they are the only texts in which Benjamin addresses the topoi of language and philosophy *directly*. Statements about these topoi, doctrinal or otherwise, can be found punctuated throughout Benjamin's work, but *Über Sprache* and *Über das Programm* constitute his only attempts to touch upon the raw flesh of the

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<sup>5</sup> 'When we ask what is the Jewish element in this man and his production, it is true to the intricate essence of Walter Benjamin that what he was very aware of as the ground of his being and at the same time often as the aim of his thought, Jewishness, can almost be perceived only in overtones, admittedly in very visible places in this work, such as the prospectus of 'Angelus Novus', the journal he planned, or the theses on the philosophy of history, his last work. But there is a great deal more behind that.' (Gershom Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin', p. 219). On the same page, Scholem yet again links the Jewish influence on Benjamin's work with Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte*: 'Als ich ihm 1916 erzählte, daß das sechzig bis achtzig Jahre vorher erschienene große vierbändige Werk des Baaderschülers Molitor über die Kabbala, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, überraschenderweise noch beim Verlag zu haben sei, gehörte es zu den ersten Werken über das Judentum, die er sich

matter, being as sparing as possible with the anaesthetic of circumspection.<sup>6</sup> Any subject of such an operation is bound to be extremely sensitive, and the surgeon can only approach it with a paradoxical mixture of brutality and caution. This has distinct consequences for the style and strategy of these two essays, most notably *Über Sprache*, in which Benjamin seems to alternate between blunt ‘Halakhic’ statements and retreating ‘Aggadic’ excursions. Reading these texts thus becomes a slow and arduous task, but very necessary

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anschaffte, und behauptete viele Jahre einen Ehrenplatz in seiner Bibliothek.’ (p. 219; see also our preface).

<sup>6</sup> This surgical metaphor is not as fanciful as it may seem. In *Einbahnstraße*, Benjamin himself describes the activity of the *homme des lettres* in the same terms in a short piece entitled ‘Poliklinik’: ‘Der Autor legt den Gedanken auf den Marmortisch des Cafés. Lange Betrachtung: denn er benutzt die Zeit, da noch das Glas – die Linse, unter den er den Patienten vornimmt – nicht vor ihm steht. Dann packt er sein Besteck allmählich aus: Füllfederhalter, Bleistift und Pfeife. Die Menge der Gäste macht, amphitheatralisch angeordnet, sein klinisches Publikum. Kaffee, vorsorglich eingefüllt und ebenso genossen, setzt den Gedanken unter Chloroform. Worauf der sinnt, hat mit der Sache selbst nicht mehr zu tun, als der Traum des Narkotisierten mit dem chirurgischen Eingriff. In den behutsamen Lineamenten der Handschrift wird zugeschnitten, der Operateur verlagert im Innern Akzente, brennt die Wucherungen der Worte heraus und schiebt als silberne Rippe ein Fremdwort ein. Endlich näht ihm mit feinen Stichen Interpunktion das Ganze zusammen und er entlohnt den Kellner, seinen Assistenten, in bar.’ (IV, 131). The description of the writer cutting into the lineaments of handwriting, shifting accents and burning out the growths of the words is an excellent illustration of the concept of the materiality of language, as we described it in the first chapter, but more importantly it also links this linguistic perspective with a privileged user, initiated in an esoteric knowledge which enables him to perform these spectacular operations (one of the words for ‘operation’ in German is *Eingriff*, emphasising yet again the rather radical physical intrusion into the very heart and matter of the words). This passage is rendered somewhat misleadingly (and mistakenly) in Edmund Jephcott’s translation as ‘with the cautious lineaments of handwriting the operator makes incisions, displaces internal accents, cauterizes proliferations of words’, which removes both the connotation of writing as *eingreifend* and the viscosity of the act, sanitising the entire description into an all-too detached and overly Latinised version of medicine. Jephcott’s writer is a modern surgeon, whereas Benjamin’s is far more reminiscent of a medieval or renaissance surgeon, with an amphitheatrical audience like the medical performer on the frontispiece of Vesalius’s *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, an engraving which is much more akin to Benjamin’s *Gedankenwelt* than the image of a depersonalised, white-clad figure in a

if we are to understand the logic, or perhaps better Λόγος, underlying much of Benjamin's work. To present such a mindful reading is what this final chapter proposes to do. This does not of course amount to a comprehensive enumeration of all the instances of 'Jewishness' in Benjamin's work, which is another perfectly justifiable, if less methodical direction this thesis could have taken. The disadvantage of such an approach, however, is that a comprehensive catalogue of Jewish references in the work and the correspondence of Benjamin would yield a lengthy document which would not necessarily lead to a fuller comprehension, because it would not reveal the underlying strategy.<sup>7</sup> As Scholem wrote: '*Dahinter steck viel mehr.*' The reading we propose here, on the other hand, will provide us with a finely-tuned instrument, a precision tool with which to read some of Benjamin's most perplexing texts. In that sense, this chapter, and indeed the entire thesis, could be considered, as one of its subtitles suggests, as the *Prolegomena zu einer künftigen Moreh Nebuchim Li-Benjamin*, the prolegomena for a future guide to the perplexed on Benjamin.

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sterilised operation room (see *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1997), p. 89).

<sup>7</sup> Such a catalogue would somewhat resemble the Borgesian map we spoke of in our first chapter, with Jewish references dotted all over it like small hamlets and big cities with no other apparent connections than the roads that link them to one another. Throughout this thesis, we have nonetheless attempted to compose a rough Jewish guide to Benjamin's work in the footnotes, which is partly why they have gradually increased in size and number as we went along. These notes can be read as so many layers of *Aggadah* to the *Halakhah* in the main text, and might have benefited from a slightly more imaginative layout in the vein of the majestic Bomberg edition of the Talmud, but such an enterprise will have to be postponed until this thesis finds its way into a different format.



## I

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, not in the least because Benjamin himself appeared to value the text beyond anything else he wrote during these early years, treating the few copies of it in circulation with almost the same reverence as one would a holy book. *Über Sprache* was, in fact, an esoteric document in every sense of the word. As far as we know, there were only four or five copies of the text in circulation at any one time, and of these copies, only three survive today (four copies, strictly speaking, but two of those are identical carbon copies of the same original).<sup>8</sup> Benjamin gave the text only to a small circle of close (intellectual) friends – from his correspondence it is hard to make out whether Benjamin had friends who were anything else but intellectual. First and foremost, he sent a copy to Gershom Scholem, who was in actual fact the original addressee of the text. Other copies went to Ernst Schoen, Theodor W. Adorno, and possibly to Werner Kraft and Ludwig Strauß.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the latter, Benjamin allowed Scholem to read *Über Sprache* to Strauß, but insisted that he should be lent a copy of Strauß's essay on ethics in return, adding: 'Ich würde was meine Arbeit angeht, Ludwig Strauß, den ich herzlich grüßen lasse, natürlich Gleiches zugestehen:

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<sup>8</sup> See 'Anmerkungen der Herausgeber,' II, 935.

<sup>9</sup> See *GB I*, pp. 343-345, 347, 350, 355, 366ff., 374, 380f., 393, 395, 399, 408, 437 and 458.

vollständiges gegenseitiges Vertrauen ist hierbei Voraussetzung.’<sup>10</sup> It may be slightly odd that Benjamin should set conditions for the permission to read *Über Sprache* to third parties, but it is positively puzzling that he should demand ‘vollständiges gegenseitiges Vertrauen’ from anyone who knew of its contents. Unless, of course, we understand the significance Benjamin attached to both the content and the form of the text. Towards the end of 1917, there are four copies of the text, and in another letter to Scholem, Benjamin considers the option of having a fifth copy made :

Von Ludwig Strauß ist noch nichts gekommen. Unter der Voraussetzung daß ich in den Besitz seiner Arbeit gelange und wenn ich dies bestätigt habe können Sie ihm ein Exemplar der Abschrift der Spracharbeit zusenden. Ein zweites kann Herr Kraft, das dritte Sie und wenn Sie keine andere Verwendung dafür haben ein viertes ich erhalten. Sonst ließe sich für mich noch ein fünftes vielleicht herstellen; aber *wer* sollte denn das vierte erhalten? <sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> ‘As far as my work is concerned, I would of course allow Ludwig Strauß, to whom I send my warmest regards, [to do] the same: complete mutual trust is a prerequisite in these matters.’ (Letter to Scholem, before and on 6 September 1917; *GB I*, 381).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Nothing has arrived from Ludwig Strauß yet. On the condition that his work comes into my possession and when I have confirmed this you can send him a copy of the language essay. Mister Kraft can have a second one, you can have the third and I can have a fourth one if you have no other use for it. Otherwise a fifth copy could perhaps be made for me; but *who* would get the fourth one?’ (Letter to Scholem, 22 October 1917; *GB I*, 393). The punctuation in Benjamin’s correspondence is often idiosyncratic, and sometimes verges on the ungrammatical or even incomprehensible, but I feel it would be both inappropriate and arbitrary tacitly to correct it, nor does the occasional missing comma or semicolon seem to merit a rigid application of the

Benjamin here reiterates the condition upon which Strauß is to be given a copy of the text, adding a hint of suspicion to his tone by saying that Scholem should wait until Benjamin has acknowledged the receipt of Strauß's essay. But, more importantly, he contemplates the possibility of initiating a fourth person into his *Lehre* (and it should not be just anybody : the question *wer?* is quite emphatic). This attitude is not only an early testimony of Benjamin's lifelong tendency towards secrecy and self-mystification, it is also the perfect indication of the kind of text Benjamin considered *Über Sprache* to be. In the words of Franz Joseph Molitor : 'Diese Schriften waren jedoch ursprünglich nicht für den öffentlichen, sondern zunächst für den Privatgebrauch des Einzelnen bestimmt, [...]. Sie waren von und für Solche gemacht, die mit der heiligen Lehre vertraut waren, daher die vielen Lücken und Dunkelheiten, [...].'<sup>12</sup> It is clear that Benjamin considered his own text to be speaking with the authority of tradition, of the *Lehre*, or to have grown out of the same seed as the *Lehre*, and thus to be, in its own monadic *Verschränkung*, the *Lehre* itself. Perhaps he even amused himself, *halb scherzhaft*, with the idea that an untimely exposure to this text could be dangerous to the uninitiated, or that he himself was open to (intellectual) persecution or accusations of false messianism if the text fell into the hands of people who could not offer a 'vollständiges gegenseitiges Vertrauen'. Perhaps this was why, again in the words of Molitor,

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academic convention to insert [sic] after every instance of doubtful grammar or syntax.

<sup>12</sup> *MI*, 298. See chapter two, notes 45, 57, 62 and 76.

jeder Schüler nicht Alles [empfang], sondern nur so viel, als seine Fähigkeit zu fassen und seine Würdigkeit zu verdienen schien. [...] es [ist] auch gewissermaßen eine wahrhafte Entheiligung des inneren Geistes, das innerste Tiefste der oberflächlichen Neugierde zur öffentlichen Schau auszustellen; – weßwegen denn das sinnvollere Alterthum über alles einen Schleyer des Geheimnisses zog, und den Zugang dazu nur denen verstattete, die der Weihe würdig befunden worden [sic].<sup>13</sup>

Benjamin started referring to *Über Sprache* as an esoteric document towards the end of 1917, less than five months after he acquired *Philosophie der Geschichte*. It is tempting to think, considering the temporal as well as semantic proximity of the passages quoted above, that reading Molitor might have influenced Benjamin's self-understanding or self-definition at this point.<sup>14</sup> This rings particularly true when we take into account that Molitor's observations on the *Lehre* and on esoteric knowledge as such are made entirely in the context of education, knowledge and language, topics which were high on the agenda in Benjamin's correspondence and conversation in 1917 and

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<sup>13</sup> '[...] not every student received everything, but only as much as his ability could grasp and his worth appeared to merit [...] it is also to a certain extent a veritable desecration of the inner spirit openly to expose the innermost depth to superficial curiosity; - whence the more sensible antiquity drew a veil of secrecy over everything, and gave access to it only to those who were deemed to be worthy of consecration.' (MI, 8).

<sup>14</sup> A letter from Benjamin to Scholem dated 12 June 1938 confirms that the former did indeed consider his own work to have both an esoteric and an exoteric side: 'Allenfalls könntest Du ihm erklären, daß Du den Brief für Dein Archiv meiner esoterischen Schriften von mir erwirkt hättest.' (GB VI, 116; quoted in Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 267).

1918, as we already mentioned in the previous chapter. At the time, he appeared to have found a twin focal point for his thought in the concept of the *Lehre* and in the work of Kant (both through Hermann Cohen and in the original), and at several points in his correspondence, he states the necessity to synthesise the two as well as his own intention to do so, an attempt which resulted in *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* (1918), a text we will discuss in the second section of this chapter. But we must not rush the argument. Exactly how crucial *Über Sprache* remained to this project in Benjamin's own estimation is voiced in a letter to Ernst Schoen, dated 28 February 1918 :

Vor allem: für mich hängen die Fragen nach dem Wesen von Erkenntnis, Recht, Kunst zusammen mit der Frage nach dem Ursprung aller menschlichen Geistesäußerung aus dem Wesen der Sprache. Dieser Zusammenhang ist es eben der zwischen den beiden vorzüglichen Gegenständen meines Denkens besteht. In Hinsicht der ersten Gedankenreihe ist auch schon mehreres aufgeschrieben was aber noch nicht communicabel ist. Kennen sie eigentlich schon meine Arbeit vom Jahre 1916 'Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen' Falls nicht könnte sie Ihnen, vorläufig leider nur leihweise zugestellt werden. Sie bildet den Ausgangspunkt aller weiteren Arbeit an den erstgenannten Problemen für mich.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 'Mainly: to me, the questions of the essence of knowledge, law and art are related to the question of the origin of all expressions of the human spirit from the essence of language. It is this connection which exists between the two objects *par excellence* of

Benjamin here characterises *Über Sprache* as the 'Ausgangspunkt aller weiteren Arbeit' on the question of the 'sprachliche Grundlagen des kategorischen Imperativs', which is the first problem he refers to (yet again, Kant and language).<sup>16</sup> Seventeen years later, in two letters to Gershom Scholem, he still mentions the early essay as his point of departure for his thoughts on language, referring to the composition of *Lehre vom Ähnlichen*, a piece which he says would become 'ausführbar allein [...] wenn ich vorher einen Vergleich dieser Notizen mit jenen frühen "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" vornehmen könnte.'<sup>17</sup> He reiterates this condition quite emphatically a week later, on 31 May 1933, saying: 'Nur muß

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my thought. With respect to the first train of thoughts, several things have been written down which are however not yet communicable. Incidentally, do you already know my essay from the year 1916 '*Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*' [?] If not, it could be sent to you, for the time being unfortunately only on loan. To me, it forms the starting point of all further work on the problems named before.' (GB I, 437). Benjamin's claim that 'mehreres aufgeschrieben [ist] was aber noch nicht communicabel ist' is quite reminiscent of the messianic-apocalyptic pathos with which Jesus sometimes speaks, and as described by Molitor in book one: '[...] wenn er ferner spricht: Ich hätte euch noch vieles zu sagen, aber ihr könnt es jetzt noch nicht vertragen, - so zeigt dieses an, daß Christus selbst die Arcan-Disciplin beobachtete, und ihnen nur stufenweise die Geheimnisse enthüllte, indem er bei Herannäherung seiner Leiden weit deutlicher als früher zu ihnen redete, nach der Auferstehung sich noch klarer offenbarte, den letzten Ausschluß aber dem Tröster überließ, der sie in aller Wahrheit unterweisen sollte.' (MI, 250). Scholem also noted a certain tendency in Benjamin to identify himself at times with a Messiah-like figure, a tendency which seems to have persisted up to *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, which in places are marked by the same oblique, yet terse and categorical force of diction which characterises the so-called *Jesusworte* (it is also this paradoxical oblique terseness which lends these *Jesusworte*, and, by extension, Benjamin's 'messianic persona' as it appears here and there throughout his work, their particularly 'Jewish' character, as we described in the first chapter).

<sup>16</sup> GB I, 436.

<sup>17</sup> '[...] would only become workable when I could carry out a comparison of these notes to the early "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen".' (Letter to Scholem dated 23 May 1933; GB IV, 214).

ich unbedingt die erste [Spracharbeit] vorher einsehen.’<sup>18</sup> This remarkable longevity of what at first may seem to be a youthful burst of creativity – he wrote *Über Sprache* in the week running up to 11 November 1916 – is a good indication of the extraordinary importance Benjamin attached to the essay. And when he writes to Scholem about the infamous *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*, the prologue to his first published book *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1925), we are given an idea as to the status of *Über Sprache* in Benjamin’s own intellectual development: ‘Diese Einleitung ist eine maßlose Chuzpe – nämlich nicht mehr und nicht weniger als Prolegomena zur Erkenntnistheorie, so eine Art zweites, ich weiß nicht ob besseres, Stadium der frühen Spracharbeit, die Du kennst, als Ideenlehre frisiert. Übrigens werde ich mir die Spracharbeit dafür noch einmal durchlesen.’<sup>19</sup> Benjamin not only characterises the new version of the language essay with the Yiddish word *Chuzpe*, or *chutzpah*, he also confesses to be uncertain as to whether he has done the original version justice, whether the new version is an improvement on the first concise and authoritative statement or not. The second page of the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*, which presents itself as a (self-consciously antiquated) *Traktat*, already gives us a clue as to why Benjamin might have thought his attempt at rewriting *Über Sprache* failed to a certain extent: ‘Traktate mögen lehrhaft zwar in ihrem Ton sein; ihrer innersten Haltung nach

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<sup>18</sup> ‘I just absolutely have to look at the first [essay on language].’ (GB IV, 223; see also GB IV, 248).

<sup>19</sup> ‘This introduction is an immeasurable *chutzpah* – namely nothing more or less than prolegomena to the theory of knowledge, a kind of second, I don’t know if better, stage of the early essay on language, which you know, groomed into a doctrine of ideas [*Ideenlehre*]. Incidentally, I will read through the language essay again for it.’ (letter to Scholem dated 19 February 1925; GB III, 14).

bleibt die Bündigkeit einer Unterweisung ihnen versagt, welche wie die Lehre aus eigener Autorität sich zu behaupten vermöchte.’<sup>20</sup> We can conclude from this that Benjamin did in fact consider *Über Sprache* to have the *Bündigkeit einer Unterweisung* which qualified it as being part of the *Lehre*, or indeed as being the *Lehre* of the essence of language. However much Benjamin thought of the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede* as a ‘maßlose Chuzpe’, it is, in a way, far less ambitious than its predecessor. It is *lehrhaft*, but it lacks the terseness of the *Lehre*. Just as Benjamin had qualified the stories of Franz Kafka as Aggadah without Halakhah, his own *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede* can be read as the Aggadah to the esoteric and hidden Halakhah that is *Über Sprache*.

When Benjamin wanted to hear the sound of his own sentences in the ‘holy language’, Scholem tells us he asked this only ‘halb scherzhaft’, which suggests that there was more to this request than mere intellectual pleasantry. And when Molitor writes the following words in book one of *Philosophie der Geschichte*, Benjamin might well have recognised in them not only his own request, but even the *Lehrsatz* that is *Über Sprache* itself:

Die biblischen Namen haben alle einen mystischen Sinn, der sich freilich nur aufschließen läßt durch die Zurückführung des Wortes auf seine Wurzel. Bei der bisher gewöhnten unkorrekten Behandlung dieser Namen in den Uebersetzungen ging natürlich ihre Bedeutung verloren, und sie sind uns jetzt alle lauter Worte ohne Sinn. Aus dieser Ursache

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Tractates may be didactic in their tone, but according to their innermost orientation, the terseness of an instruction remains denied to them, [a terseness] which would be able to establish itself out of its own authority, like the *Lehre*.’ (I, 208).



haben wir den Versuch gewagt, die ebräischen Namen nach ihrer wahren eigenthümlichen Weise auszudrücken. Mag auch solches der Ungewohntheit wegen anfangs hart und auffallend klingen, so glauben wir doch, daß sich nach und nach unser europäisches Ohr an die Töne jener heiligen Sprache gewöhnen, und in denselben jenen tief verborgenen Sinn allmählich erfassen wird.<sup>21</sup>

To Benjamin, the self-confessedly assimilated Jew, the confrontation of his holy language and his European ear must have been a paradoxical experience, but one that summarises, equally paradoxically, what *Über Sprache* is trying to do, and with it the later project of *profane Erleuchtung*, which is another metamorphosis of the same *Lehre*, as we will see later.<sup>22</sup> What Benjamin wanted to hear, says Scholem, was the ‘*Klang seiner Sätze [...] in der*

<sup>21</sup> ‘The biblical names all have a mystical sense, which can be disclosed only by reducing the word to its root. With the incorrect treatment of these names in translations, to which we have become accustomed, their meaning was of course lost, and they are now all mere words without sense. This is why we have made the attempt to express the Hebrew names according to their true characteristic way. If this may sound harsh and conspicuous at first, because of its unfamiliarity, we believe that our European ear will grow used to the tones of this holy language little by little, and will gradually grasp the deep hidden sense within them.’ (MI, 127n).

<sup>22</sup> Scholem appears to have recognised the paradoxical, yet potentially productive position of Benjamin, who was neither Jew nor Gentile in the strictest sense of the word, as early as 1915, when he writes in his diary: ‘[...] eine verzichtende Jugend, die, wie ich es nenne, um die zerbrochenen Schwerter ihrer Helden stehen wird, mit vollem Bewußtsein das Nationaljudentum verwerfen wird, aber nicht, um in ein besseres Deutschtum aufzugehen, sondern um eine ganze neue Menschheit. Eine revolutionäre Edel-Assimilation: Benjamin z.B.’ (diary entry dated 29 December 1915; Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 1, p. 222). Note again the semi-messianic tone in the description of Benjamin. The young Scholem’s almost religious adoration for Benjamin before the crisis in their friendship of 1918 is quite explicit in a diary entry dated 1 March of that year, when he writes: ‘Ich kann nicht beschreiben, ich kann nur im Wort der Feststellung erklären, welch unendliche Größe der Gestalt mich

Ursprache' (our emphasis). It did not seem to matter that, not knowing Hebrew, Benjamin would not understand the words: Scholem's reading evidently communicated something to him which was not so much expressed *through* the language, but *in* the language. The very sounds of 'jener heiligen Sprache' would have communicated a 'tief verborgenen Sinn' which goes beyond lexicon and grammar, much as Molitor claims the biblical names in their original and slightly alienating tones would do. And this is in fact precisely what Benjamin proclaims in the characteristically declamatory tone of *Über Sprache*: 'Der Name hat im Bereich der Sprache einzig diesen Sinn und diese unvergleichlich hohe Bedeutung: daß er das innerste Wesen der Sprache selbst ist. Der Name ist dasjenige, *durch* das sich nichts mehr, und *in* dem die Sprache selbst und absolut sich mitteilt.'<sup>23</sup> These intentionally mystifying sentences attempt to define an idea around which the whole of *Über Sprache* is constantly circling without actually touching it; because, as Benjamin says in the later version of the essay, the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*, truth cannot be 'wanted': 'Wahrheit tritt nie in eine Relation und insbesondere in keine intentionale. Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis als ein in der Begriffsintention bestimmter ist nicht die Wahrheit. Die Wahrheit ist ein aus Ideen gebildetes intentionsloses Sein.'<sup>24</sup> This goes back to a distinction

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überkommt, wenn ich an meine Freundschaft mit diesem Propheten Gottes denke.' (*Tagebücher*, vol. 2, p. 146).

<sup>23</sup> 'The name has in the sphere of language only this meaning and this incomparably high significance: that it is the innermost essence of language itself. The name is that *through* which nothing communicates itself anymore and *in* which language communicates itself absolutely.' (II, 144).

<sup>24</sup> 'Truth never enters into a relationship, least of all into an intentional one. The object of knowledge as one determined in the conceptual intention is not truth. Truth is an intentionless being formed from ideas.' (I, 216). On the same page, Benjamin

which is already embryonically present in *Über Sprache*, namely between *Erkenntnis* and *Wahrheit*, knowledge and truth. Benjamin's attempt to locate the essential philosophical characteristics of truth informs not only the contents, but also the form and style of his text in a particular way, a way which can be called theological in the strictest sense of the word, as it attempts to define or circumnavigate the ineffable. We are convinced that *Über Sprache* constitutes Benjamin's first thorough exploration of a profoundly complex way of thinking which would continue to inform his work, through several phenomenological mutations, until his death. After all, the dwarf in the chess machine, however abject and ugly, is still the allegory of theology. This is the reason why we believe a close reading of *Über Sprache*, upon which we are to embark now, can provide us with the keys, or perhaps in his own words the *Vorschule*, to Benjamin's *Lehre*.

One can seek and succeed to grasp knowledge, but not truth, and it is clearly the latter which *Über Sprache*, with all the paradoxality of a self-proclaimed prophecy, believes to reveal. This may be what Benjamin meant when he suggested that the text of *Über Sprache* should be treated with the utmost care, as it is a theologically dangerous text, slowly but very steadily making its way

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reiterates the privileged status of the name in connection with the intentionless being that is truth: 'Das aller Phänomenalität entrückte Sein, dem allein diese Gewalt eignet, ist das des Namens. Es bestimmt die Gegebenheit der Ideen. Gegeben aber sind sie nicht sowohl in einer Ursprache, denn in einem Urvernehmen, in welchem die Worte ihren benennenden Adel unverloren an die erkennende Bedeutung besitzen.' (I, 216). This passage not only confirms the continuity which Benjamin said existed between *Über Sprache* and the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*, it also anticipates similar statements about the perceptive qualities of language in *Lehre vom Ähnlichen* and *Über das mimetische Vermögen* as well as the otherwise enigmatic statement from one of the *Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen*: 'Man hört nicht nur mit den Ohren, man hört auch mit der Stimme.' (VI, 595). We shall return to these texts later.

into the conceptual twilight zone in between orthodoxy and heresy.<sup>25</sup> And this also explains the semi-revelatory tone of *Über Sprache* itself. If the text is to be concerned with truth rather than knowledge, revelation rather than discovery must be its model. As Benjamin again states in the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*: '[...] Wahrheit [ist] nicht Enthüllung, die das Geheimnis vernichtet, sondern Offenbarung, die ihm gerecht wird.'<sup>26</sup> We find a similar concept in *Philosophie der Geschichte*, where Molitor writes about the nature of the mystical truths contained in the Bible:

Diese hohen Geheimnisse der theoretischen und praktischen Kabbalah sind nach der Lehre der jüdischen Mystiker, alle in der Bibel, entweder mit klaren Worten hier und da ausgesprochen, oder aber meistens in dunkeln Bildern, und geheimnisvollen Winken רמזים (R'masim) bloß angedeutet. [...] Denn das Tiefste und Heiligste, das seiner Natur nach

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<sup>25</sup> It is a particularly fascinating paradox of the concept of human divinity – apart from the fact that the expression is itself an oxymoron – that the proclamation of one's own divinity, or even the admission of the desire to become sanctified, makes it virtually impossible to then be considered as such. Self-proclaimed messiahs such as Shabbetai Tsevi have always been treated with the utmost suspicion in the Jewish tradition, and Jesus himself usually took care never to proclaim himself to be the Son of God, but merely to confirm what others thought of him: 'He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered not to tell anyone about him.' (Mk 8: 29-30; see also Mt 16: 20; Mt 21: 27; Mk 11: 33; Lk 9: 20). A similar dilemma is faced by Simeon Stylites in the eponymous poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson: Simeon's desire to be sanctified is construed, even by himself, as ambition, a deadly sin which will achieve the opposite of what he desires. A more humorous representation of the same problem is Brian's despair in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* at the double bind he faces when adoring crowds proclaim him as the Messiah, answering his denial by saying: 'Only the true Messiah denies his divinity.' Of course, when Brian then confirms that he is the Messiah, thus disqualifying himself, the crowd actually accepts his confirmation.

<sup>26</sup> '[...] truth is not unveiling, which destroys the secret, but revelation, which does justice to it.' (I, 211).

dem äußern Sinne verborgen, ist in der heil. Schrift stets mit dem Schleyer des Geheimnisses bedeckt. [...] weil das Tiefste und Allerheiligste äußerlich nicht begriffen, sondern mit gläubigem Gemüthe aufgefaßt, und nur im Innersten erkannt werden kann.<sup>27</sup>

The idea that truth is a 'dark image' which cannot be grasped by the predatory intellect – a postlapsarian phenomenon – but must be contemplated so that it might reveal itself, is very much akin to Benjamin's statements on truth in the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*, where he compares the 'transzendente Wucht [...] der Wahrheit' with the contemplation of a mosaic: 'Die Relation der mikrologischen Verarbeitung zum Maß des bildnerischen und des intellektuellen Ganzen spricht es aus, wie der Wahrheitsgehalt nur bei genauester Versenkung in die Einzelheiten eines Sachgehalts sich fassen läßt.'<sup>28</sup> The 'truth content' of a work of art will only allow itself to be grasped – and the metaphor doubtless has something of the erotic about it – if it is approached with a meticulous and loving attention to detail that can only be called religious. If, to continue the metaphor, the work of art takes note of any dishonourable intentions in the mind of the critic, it will turn away, and the

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<sup>27</sup> 'These high secrets of the theoretical and practical Kabbalah are all, according to the doctrine of the Jewish mystics, either expressed in clear words here and there, or mostly merely indicated in dark images and secretive hints רמזים (R'masim) [...]. Because the deepest and holiest, which is hidden to the outer senses according to its nature, is always covered with the veil of secrecy in the Holy Writ. [...] because the deepest and most holy cannot be comprehended externally, but can obly be grasped with a devout disposition and known only in one's innermost self.' (MI, 47-48).

<sup>28</sup> '[...] the transcendent power of truth [...]. It [i.e. the metaphor of the mosaic] expresses the relationship of the micrological interpretation to the measure of the pictorial and intellectual whole, as the truth content can only be grasped with the most accurate immersion in the singularities of a subject matter.' (I, 208).

critical intention will be destroyed. Truth is a vision, an image granted to someone who approaches it *mit gläubigem Gemüthe*. The fragile and precarious nature of this truth as an image is conveyed with an image from Schiller:

Die Wahrheit ist der Tod der Intention. Eben das kann ja die Fabel von einem verschleierte Bilde, zu Sais, besagen, mit dessen Enthüllung zusammenbricht, wer die Wahrheit zu erfragen gedachte. Nicht eine rätselhafte Gräßlichkeit ist's, die das bewirkt, sondern die Natur der Wahrheit, vor welcher auch das reinste Feuer des Suchens wie unter Wassern verlöscht.<sup>29</sup>

As a basic prerequisite to be able to address its subject, *Über Sprache* does indeed use certain models or moulds into which to cast itself, and this is a strategy which Benjamin would continue to use. Just as the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede* presented itself nine years later as a *Traktat* (even though it calls itself a prologue), *Über Sprache*, both implicitly and explicitly, mimics the form of the *Lehrsatz* or doctrinal statement, the *theologoumenon* or theological

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<sup>29</sup> 'Truth is the death of intention. And this is what the fable of a veiled image, at Sais, can mean, at whose unveiling anyone who intended to ascertain the truth would collapse. It is not a mysterious horror which brings this about, but the nature of truth, in the face of which even the purest fire of seeking extinguishes as under waters.' (I, 216). The remarkable longevity of this concept of truth as the death of intention is borne out by some of the notes for the *Passagen-Werk*, written ten years after *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*: '[...] jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit. In ihm ist die Wahrheit mit Zeit bis zum Zerspringen geladen. (Dies Zerspringen, nichts anderes, ist der Tod der Intention, der also mit der Geburt der echten historischen Zeit, der Zeit der Wahrheit, zusammenfällt.)' (V, 578). Note also

proposition (or the ‘metaphysical truth’ of which Benjamin was so fond), and even the midrash. The latter is the more tentative of the three, but nonetheless recognisable as such, as Benjamin reveals a ‘tiefer verborgenen Sinn’ – as Molitor defined midrash – in a passage from Genesis. With reference to the special status of the human name in the first chapters of Genesis, and by extension in the theory of language as such, illustrated by the fact that man names all creatures without being named himself, Benjamin writes: ‘Vielleicht ist es kühn, aber kaum unmöglich, den Vers 2,20 in seinem zweiten Teile in diesem Zusammenhang zu nennen: daß der Mensch alle Wesen benannte, “aber für den Menschen ward keine Gehilfin gefunden, die um ihn wäre”.’<sup>30</sup> This, as we discussed extensively in the first chapter, is an eminently midrashic strategy: lifting a verse out of its original context and inserting it, seemingly seamlessly, into a new one, where it takes on a further and deeper meaning, without losing its ‘original’ contextual meaning, something of which Benjamin appears to be well aware, as witnessed by his preamble ‘Vielleicht ist es kühn, aber kaum unmöglich’. There are other instances where Benjamin picks the text of Genesis apart to reveal hidden meanings – the ‘rhythm’ of the act of creation, for example: ‘Es werde – Er machte (schuf) – Er nannte’<sup>31</sup>, or the passage where Benjamin discusses the material out of which man was made<sup>32</sup> –

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the aquatic metaphor of truth as transitive and intransitive *Versenkung* or immersion (we will come back to this crucial topos towards the end of this chapter).

<sup>30</sup> ‘It may be bold, but hardly impossible, to quote the second part of verse 2:20 in this context: that man named all creatures, “but for man there was not found a helper as his partner”.’ (II, 149).

<sup>31</sup> ‘Let there be – He made (created) – He named.’ (II, 148).

<sup>32</sup> ‘Die zweite Fassung der Schöpfungsgeschichte, die vom Einblasen des Odems erzählt, berichtet zugleich, der Mensch sei aus Erde gemacht worden. Dies ist in der

but the first case is particularly interesting because Benjamin self-consciously recognises the interpretation as a daring one, as an instance of lateral thinking, so to speak, which conforms perfectly to the dynamic of midrashic interpretation, or 'wie das vor sich geht'; the very dynamic which Scholem had sought to explain to Benjamin the year before.<sup>33</sup> From one particular paragraph of *Über Sprache* it becomes clear that Benjamin consciously and intentionally used theological texts as a model or a conceptual pattern, in this case the Bible:

Wenn im folgenden das Wesen der Sprache auf Grund der ersten Genesiskapitel betrachtet wird, so soll damit weder Bibelinterpretation als Zweck verfolgt noch auch die Bibel an dieser Stelle objektiv als offenbarte Wahrheit dem Nachdenken zugrunde gelegt werden, sondern das, was aus dem Bibeltext in Ansehung der Natur der Sprache selbst sich ergibt, soll aufgefunden werden; und die Bibel ist *zunächst* in dieser Absicht nur darum unersetzlich, weil diese Ausführungen im Prinzipiellen ihr darin folgen, daß in ihnen die Sprache als eine letzte, nur in ihrer Entfaltung zu betrachtende, unerklärliche und mystische Wirklichkeit vorausgesetzt wird. Die Bibel, indem sie sich selbst als Offenbarung betrachtet, muß notwendig die sprachlichen Grundtatsachen entwickeln.<sup>34</sup>

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ganzen Schöpfungsgeschichte die einzige Stelle, an der von einem Material des Schöpfers die Rede ist [...]' (II, 147-148).

<sup>33</sup> Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> 'When the following looks at the essence of language on the grounds of the first chapters of Genesis, it does not intend to pursue biblical interpretation as a goal, nor should the Bible at this point be used objectively as revealed truth as the basis for thought, but that which presents itself from the text of the Bible with regard to the



The reason why Benjamin uses the Bible, and specifically the first chapters of Genesis, which relate the creation stories, is because it presents itself as revelation, and must therefore necessarily explore the nature and fundamental characteristics of language. Revelation, as we have seen, is the medium in which truth exists, and the locus of truth is language, or more precisely, the name: 'Das höchste Geistesgebiet der Religion ist (im Begriff der Offenbarung) zugleich das einzige, welches das Unaussprechliche nicht kennt. Denn es wird ausgesprochen im Namen und spricht sich aus als Offenbarung.'<sup>35</sup> This identification of revelation and the name as the highest sphere of religion echoes a familiar topos from the Jewish tradition, namely that God created the world by speaking or revealing his own name, and that this revelation is at the same time Torah, in other words, that the whole of the Torah *is* the name of God.<sup>36</sup> It would follow from Benjamin's formulation that,

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nature of language should be found; and the Bible is only irreplaceable in pursuing this plan *primarily* because these observations follow from it in principle, as they presuppose language as a final, inexplicable and mystical reality, which should be observed in its unfolding. The Bible, in that it conceives of itself as revelation, must necessarily unfold the fundamental facts of language' (II, 147).

<sup>35</sup> 'The highest spiritual sphere of religion (in the concept of revelation) is at the same time the only one which does not know the inexpressible. Because it is expressed in the name and expresses itself as revelation.' (II, 147).

<sup>36</sup> As Scholem writes in *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, in words that sound as if they might have been quoted from *Über Sprache*: 'Sprache erreicht Gott, weil sie von Gott ausgegangen ist. In der Sprache der Menschen, die jedenfalls *prima facie* nur erkennenden Charakters ist, spiegelt sich die schöpferische Kraft Gottes wider. Alle Schöpfung – und das ist ein großes Prinzip bei allen Kabbalisten – ist, von Gott her gesehen, nichts als ein Ausdruck seines verborgenen Wesens, das in der aus Gottes Tiefen selbst quellenden Benennung seiner selbst, in dem heiligen Namen Gottes, seine höchste Vollendung findet.' (*Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, sixth edition (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996) p. 19). See also 'Offenbarung und Tradition als religiöse Kategorien im Judentum', in *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 90-119; p.

if the Bible conceives of itself as revelation, it must be a name, for this is how revelation expresses itself; and if the Bible, as Benjamin says it does, must necessarily explore the *Grundtatsachen*, the fundamental facts of language, it follows that name, revelation and language are one. This does indeed seem to be the idea around which *Über Sprache* is circling, and which is suggested or expressed in many different ways throughout the essay, perhaps most concisely in the following *theologoumenon*: 'Im Wort wurde geschaffen, und Gottes sprachliches Wesen ist das Wort.'<sup>37</sup> The 'sprachliches Wesen' is juxtaposed at the beginning of the essay with the 'geistiges Wesen', which is expressed as 'sprachliches Wesen' *in* rather than *through* language. The two are not identical, but the 'geistiges Wesen' as such is unknowable and uncommunicable: 'Was an einem geistigen Wesen mitteilbar ist, das ist sein sprachliches Wesen.'<sup>38</sup> It follows from this that the only knowable and

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107). See also David Stern's remark, which we quoted in our first chapter, that the Torah is 'a trope for God' (David Stern, 'Midrash', p. 619; see chapter one, note 18).

<sup>37</sup> 'In the word was created, and God's linguistic essence is the word.' (II, 149).

<sup>38</sup> 'What is communicable of a spiritual essence is its linguistic essence.' (II, 142). This idea is a Wittgensteinian paradox, with all the tautological ambiguity of 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, in *Werkausgabe*, 8 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), vol. 1, p. 84). Benjamin himself appears to be struggling with the paradox up to a certain extent, as he reiterates the idea twice in very similar terms (but with different emphases: 'Das geistige Wesen ist mit dem sprachlichen identisch, nur *sofern* es mitteilbar ist.' (II, 142) And: 'Es wird das geistige Wesen also von vornherein als mitteilbar gesetzt, oder vielmehr gerade *in* die Mitteilbarkeit gesetzt, und die Thesis: das sprachliche Wesen der Dinge ist mit ihrem geistigen, sofern letzteres mitteilbar ist, identisch, wird in ihrem "sofern" zu einer Tautologie.' (II, 145). The relationship Benjamin postulates between 'sprachliches' and 'geistiges Wesen' is quite similar to the Kantian distinction between *phenomenon* and *noumenon*. 'Geistiges Wesen' and *noumenon*, or 'das Ding an Sich', are knowable only insofar as they are communicable in language, thus becoming 'sprachliches Wesen' rather than 'geistiges Wesen', or can appear as a *phenomenon*. The very inquiry as to their essence either turns them into a complete unknowable or, *insofar* as something can be said about them, into their complement. In his article 'The Genesis

communicable essence of God, his 'sprachliches Wesen' in other words, is the word, or language itself.<sup>39</sup> And again we are back to the focal point – or rather vanishing point – of the essay: language.

As Benjamin states at the very beginning of *Über Sprache*: 'Ein Dasein, welches ganz ohne Beziehung zur Sprache wäre, ist eine Idee; aber diese Idee läßt sich auch im Bezirk der Ideen, deren Umkreis diejenige Gottes bezeichnet, nicht fruchtbar machen.'<sup>40</sup> This distinctly odd formulation, in which the

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of Judgment', Peter Fenves vehemently rejects any connection between Wittgenstein's *Schweigegebot* and Benjamin's *Über Sprache*, but he does not consider the paradoxical nature of the latter (his vitriol seems to be directed at Benjamin's statement of the ideal but futile nature of a being which has no relationship to language; see note 40 of this chapter). Although Fenves' knowledge of Wittgenstein probably far exceeds mine, his rather frantic attempt to read *Über Sprache* entirely and exclusively in the context of Kant, Husserl, Heidegger and Kierkegaard without even a cursory mention of (Jewish) theology – in spite of his promising title – nevertheless strikes me as rather tenuous, as it is hard to imagine how such a reading could be made fruitful in the *Umkreis* of Benjamin's work (Peter Fenves, 'The Genesis of Judgment: Spatiality, Analogy, and Metaphor in Benjamin's "On Language as Such and on Human Language"', in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, edited by David S. Ferris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 75-93.

<sup>39</sup> This idea is structurally similar to Maimonides's doctrine of the essence of God, which he said was necessarily unknowable and could only be described with analogies and metaphors. In other words, the words used by humankind to describe God do not actually describe God *as such*, but only an imperfect human construct of a perfect being. This is essentially what Benjamin is saying with his distinction between the unknowable 'geistiges Wesen' and the communicable 'sprachliches Wesen'. Another fascinating parallel between *Über Sprache* and Maimonides's philosophy is the latter's concept of the rationality of God and the Law, stating that the Law can be followed by mankind as God, as a rational being, would never have decreed a Law which would be unfulfillable in principle (an argument not unlike Descartes's postulation and subsequent denial of the *malin génie*). In a similar movement, Benjamin states that mankind's God-given task to name the whole of creation must also be fulfillable in principle, and that therefore human language must be fundamentally akin to the language of objects *in* (the language of) God: 'Unlösbar wäre [diese Aufgabe], wäre nicht die Namensprache des Menschen und die namenlose der Dinge in Gott verwandt, entlassen aus demselben schaffenden Wort, [...]' (II, 151).

<sup>40</sup> 'A being which would have no relationship to language whatsoever is an idea; but this idea cannot be made fruitful even in the domain of ideas, and the penumbra of these indicates the idea of God.' (II, 141).

grammar seems to mimic the content of the sentence, is a circumnavigation of an unspecified centre, and this circumnavigation or penumbra, we are told, is the idea of God.<sup>41</sup> This idea and its form are characteristic of *Über Sprache*. Everything is related in some way to language, but language, in a sense, remains the great unknown (and some of the ambiguities or even obscurities in Benjamin's language are indeed extremely hard to unravel). The clearest statement of the fundamental principles of language comes later in the essay,

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<sup>41</sup> In his essayistic short story, 'The Library of Babel', which was written in 1941, Jorge Luis Borges unfolds a similar idea with regards to the (linguistic) essence of God. Borges defines the universe, which some call 'the Library', and which contains an infinite number of hexagonal chambers, as '*a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable*.' Characteristically, concepts and possibilities at the limits of thought lead Borges, too, into the realm of theology: 'Mystics claim that their ecstasies reveal to them a circular chamber containing an enormous circular book with a continuous spine that goes completely around the walls. But their testimony is suspect, their words obscure. That cyclical book is God.' ('The Library of Babel', in *Collected Fictions*, pp. 112-118). The idea of God as an (impossible) circular book, mimicking the unattainable (and hence impossible) circumference of the universe is quite similar to Benjamin's notion of God as the circumference of the realm of ideas. The relationship of these ideas to meaning as such is explained by Borges as follows: 'In order for a book to exist, it is sufficient that it be *possible*. Only the impossible is excluded. For example, no book is also a staircase, though there are no doubt books that discuss and deny and prove that possibility, and others whose structure corresponds to that of a staircase.' ('The Library of Babel', p. 117). Drawing the logical conclusion from these two quotations, we can state that in order for God, who is a book, to exist, it suffices that he be *possible*. Whether or not the idea of God can be made fruitful is another matter altogether: Borges says that there is a book in the Library that contains an endless sequence of the letters M C V repeated from the first line to the last: 'For every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency.' ('The Library of Babel', p. 114). By the same token, Benjamin does not feel the need to confirm or deny the existence of God: this existence is completely irrelevant and entirely unconnected to the *idea* of God, which is the only thing with which theology *pur sang* should concern itself. Although the connection between Benjamin and Borges has been noted in passing, a comprehensive study of such patterns in Benjamin and Borges remains to be written (see David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 8 *passim*).

when Benjamin writes about the ‘tiefe deutliche Beziehung des Schöpfungsaktes auf die Sprache.’

Mit der schaffenden Allmacht der Sprache setzt er ein, und am Schluß einverleibt sich gleichsam die Sprache das Geschaffene, sie benennt es. Sie ist also das Schaffende, und das Vollendende, sie ist Wort und Name. In Gott ist der Name schöpferisch, weil er Wort ist, und Gottes Wort ist erkennend, weil es Name ist. ‘Und er sah, daß es gut war’, das ist: er hatte es erkannt durch den Namen. Das absolute Verhältnis des Namens zur Erkenntnis besteht allein in Gott, nur dort ist der Name, weil er im innersten mit dem schaffenden Wort identisch ist, das reine Medium der Erkenntnis. Das heißt: Gott machte die Dinge in ihren Namen erkennbar. Der Mensch aber benennt sie maßen der Erkenntnis.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> ‘[...] the deep, clear relationship of the act of creation and language. It begins with the creative omnipotence of language, and at the end language absorbs creation, it names it. It is therefore the creating and the completing, it is word and name. In God, the name is creative, because it is word, and God’s word is knowing, because it is name. “And he saw that it was good”, that is, he knew it through the name. The absolute relationship of the name and knowledge exists only in God, only there is the name the pure medium of knowledge, because it is most intimately identical to the creative word. That is: God made objects knowable in their names. Man, however, names them by way of knowledge.’ (II, 148). The ‘absolute Verhältnis des Namens zur Erkenntnis’, which exists only in God, should probably be read as the precursor to the distinction between *Wahrheit* and *Erkenntnis* discussed in the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*. The reason why we suspect this to be so is because Benjamin defines human *Erkenntnis* in postlapsarian terms as the knowledge between good and evil, which degrades language to a *Mittel*, a means to an end, in other words, designed to accomplish an intended task: ‘Indem der Mensch aus der reinen Sprache des Namens heraustritt, macht er die Sprache zum Mittel [...]’ (II, 153). And as we have seen, intention and truth are diametrically opposed to one another.

Language opens the act of creation, or rather *is* the act of creation, and completes creation by naming it (through mankind). Language is both *schöpferisch* and *erkennend*, it is divine, human and objective. It is divine in that language originates with God, and insofar as the ‘sprachliche[s] Wesen’ of God actually *is* the word. Language is human because, after having served as the medium of mankind’s creation, it is bestowed upon mankind to name the whole of creation: ‘[...] im Menschen entließ Gott die Sprache, die *ihm* als Medium der Schöpfung gedient hatte, frei aus sich.’<sup>43</sup> And language is objective finally, because the objects communicate their ‘sprachliche[s] Wesen’ in their own mute objective language to mankind so it might be translated into human language. We can find a similar idea in chapter seven of the first book of *Philosophie der Geschichte*, where Molitor also appears to characterise language as a divine medium, mediating between God, man and world: ‘Die Ursprache und Urschrift ist weder eine menschliche Erfindung noch eine Nachahmung der äußern Natur, sondern eine Nachahmung Gottes, eine Nachbildung des göttlichen Redens und Schreibens.’<sup>44</sup> The *Ursprache* of which Molitor speaks may be taken to correspond to Benjamin’s concept of the *reine Sprache*, which he has defined in *Über Sprache*, as well as in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, as both the prelapsarian and messianic state of language.<sup>45</sup> Mankind leaves this state of language at the moment of the Fall,

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<sup>43</sup> ‘[...] in man, God released the language from himself which had served *him* as the medium of creation.’ (II, 149).

<sup>44</sup> ‘The original language and original writing are neither a human invention nor an imitation of the outer, physical nature, but an imitation of God, a copying of the divine speaking and writing.’ (MI, 341).

<sup>45</sup> The idea of a pure language which gradually declines as a result of the Fall, or the decline of which constitutes the Fall, is described as follows in volume one of

when the '*menschliches Wort*' is born and language becomes both a means to an end as well as a means to judge: 'Indem der Mensch aus der reinen Sprache des Namens heraustritt, macht der die Sprache zum Mittel [...].'<sup>46</sup> It is important to draw this analogy, as Benjamin proceeds to define the (human) name, which corresponds to the prelapsarian *reine Sprache* or Molitor's *Ursprache*, as '[d]as tiefste Abbild diese göttlichen Wortes und der Punkt, an dem die Menschensprache den innigsten Anteil an der göttlichen Unendlichkeit des bloßen Wortes erlangt [...]. Der Eigenname ist die Gemeinschaft des Menschen mit dem *schöpferischen* Wort Gottes.'<sup>47</sup> Molitor states this community of human language with the creative word of God in a for him uncharacteristically apodictic definition: 'Wie das menschliche Denken ein

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*Philosophie der Geschichte*: 'Denn wenn die alte Zeit Alles in der Total-Einheit erkannte, das Aeüßere und Innere damals völlig eins war, so war dem Menschen die ganze Natur und göttliche Offenbarung gleichsam eine für sich verständliche, aber eben darum völlig bewußtlose Symbolik. Als aber der Mensch aus der Einheit getreten, das unmittelbare Verständnis jener reinen Bildersprache verloren, und durch die Reflexion die Uebereinstimmung zwischen dem Aeußern und innern künstlich auffinden mußte, so ward ihm erst jetzt das Aeüßere als ein Symbol des Innern zum bewußten Objekte, und damit erwachte das Streben und Bemühen, überall mit Absicht hinter dem äußern, sinnlichen Bilde die höhere geistige Idee aufzusuchen, und alles Sichtbare auf unsichtbare, intellektuelle Verhältnisse zu beziehen.' (M I, 188-189). Note the emphasis on unity and immediacy as characteristics of the 'reinen Bildersprache', understanding of which was based on a 'bewußtlose Symbolik'. This is similar not only to Benjamin's definition of the 'reine Sprache', but also to his description of the experience of tradition as a voluntary abandonment of the intentionality and individuality of consciousness (see below).

<sup>46</sup> II, 153 (Benjamin's emphasis).

<sup>47</sup> '[t]he most profound copy of this divine word and the point at which human language obtains the most intimate share of the divine infinity of the pure word [...]. The proper name is the community of man with the *creative* word of God.' (II, 149-150; Benjamin's emphasis). The fact that this community of human language should be with the *creative* word of God is even more significant in view of the paragraph that follows the passage from Molitor quoted above, in which he too identifies the 'divine speaking and writing' as creative and infinite: 'Denn die Gottheit ist der einzige, unendliche, allmächtige Redner, in dem ewig fortdauernden Akte der

Gleichnis zu der ewigen urbildlichen Idee in Gott, so ist das Sprechen gewissermaßen das Bild des unendlichen Schaffens, oder das Hervorbringen der ewigen urbildlichen Idee als ein Daseyn außer Gott.’<sup>48</sup> It is quite interesting to note here that Molitor also appears to locate the realm of ideas within God, or, in other words, that God is the *Umkreis* of the realm of ideas (any manifestation of the ideas outside of this divine penumbra seems to be either a quasi-platonic imitation or a more mystical-kabbalist invocation of the idea insofar as it can exist ‘außer Gott’).

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Schöpfungs-Sprache, womit sie immer aufs neue die Schöpfung hervorbringt, und alles Leben mit ihrem göttlichen Odem beodmet [sic].’ (MI, 341).

<sup>48</sup> ‘Just as human thought is similar to the eternal archetypal [*urbildlich*] idea in God, speech is to a certain extent the image of the infinite [act of] creation, or the bringing out of the eternal archetypal idea as a being outside of God.’ (MI, 338).



## II

Regardless of whether we can speak here of a direct or an indirect influence of these very elementary Jewish topoi on *Über Sprache*, it does appear to be the case that both Benjamin and Molitor, however disparate they may be in time and place, see eye to eye as far as their conception of the ‘sprachlichen Grundtatsachen’ are concerned.<sup>49</sup> But the similarities in their *Lehre* do not end there. When we take a closer look at *Über Sprache* and Molitor’s chapter entitled *Ueber den Ursprung der Sprache und Schrift bei den Ebräern*, we find that they agree on three other important points, namely the arbitrariness of the sign, the aforementioned status of human knowledge versus divine knowledge, and the abstract concept of the *Ursprache* and its necessary characteristics. Starting with the latter, it may be surprising to find that Molitor, too, did not take tradition literally. Just as Benjamin used the Bible as an illustration of the fundamental principles of language, Molitor at this point dismisses any

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<sup>49</sup> Winfried Menninghaus claims, as we discussed in the previous chapter, that Benjamin had no knowledge whatsoever of the Kabbalah at the time when he wrote *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, and that it is therefore not very productive to quote its sources in an attempt to interpret the theory of language propounded in it: ‘Ein unvermittelter Rekurs auf den historischen Textbestand der Kabbala widerspricht also erstens Benjamins eigenen, von Scholem bestätigten Aussagen über sein “hilfloses Nichtwissen auf diesem mystischen ‘Erdstrich’.” Und er läßt zweitens die Dunkelheit von Benjamins Texten, statt sie zu erhellen, vollends ins Ungreifbare und Unsinnige abgleiten.’ (*Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, pp. 190-191). I feel this is too dismissive by far, as we have pointed out not only that Benjamin’s knowledge of the Jewish tradition as such, as he would have gained from his intensive conversations with Scholem, far exceeded the norm of what one would call ‘embryonic knowledge’, but also that these topoi are not really Kabbalist *pur sang*, but rather form part and parcel of the substance of the Jewish tradition. Moreover, as Benjamin himself states quite clearly, he derives these principles partly on his own account from the necessary form of the Bible and Jewish traditional thinking on language itself.

reference to empirical knowledge and states that, in these matters, we need *in principle* to turn to the idea: ‘Die erste Erfindung der Schrift verliert sich in das Dunkel der Geschichte, wohin, weil es an allen Erfahrungs-Daten fehlt, die gewöhnliche Kritik mit ihrer Beurtheilung nicht hinreicht, und also die Idee nur allein zu entscheiden vermag.’<sup>50</sup> Thus Molitor reads tradition as a conceptual construct from the Bible, which presents itself as revelation and must therefore propound certain *Grundtatsachen* with regard to language:

Ja die jüdische Tradition steigt noch höher hinauf, und behauptet, das Ebräische sey die erste Ursprache gewesen, die Adam im Paradiese gesprochen. Obgleich nun solches nicht nach dem buchstäblichen Sinne genommen werden darf, indem die Ursprache, welche der Mensch in seiner Geistigkeit vor dem Falle geredet, von ganz anderer Art als alle jetzt bestehende [sic] Sprachen gewesen, so muß doch, wenn die Bibel das Buch der göttlichen Offenbarung seyn soll, die ebräische Sprache ein zwar geschwächter verkörperter, aber doch treuer Abdruck jener ersten, reinen Ursprache seyn. Denn gleichwie der Mensch auch noch in seinem gefallenem Zustand den Abglanz seiner ehemaligen geistigen Hoheit an sich trägt, so muß auch seine Sprache wenigstens die Spuren jenes magischen Schöpfungsgeistes der frühern Ursprache noch behalten

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<sup>50</sup> ‘The first invention of writing is lost in the darkness of history, where normal criticism with its judgement does not suffice, because all experiential data are lacking, and thus only the idea is able to decide.’ (MI, 335-336).

haben; die in seinen Nachkommen sich immer mehr degenerirte, je tiefer das Menschengeschlecht nach und nach sank.<sup>51</sup>

First and foremost, Molitor consciously leaves the sphere of literal interpretation to state that what he is about to say must necessarily follow from the Bible insofar as it conceives of itself as divine revelation, or in the words of Benjamin, 'indem sie sich selbst als Offenbarung betrachtet'. Secondly, he paints a similar picture to Benjamin of a prelapsarian human language which was characterised by a greater degree of divinity than its postlapsarian counterpart, and which gradually degenerated into a language in which words and concepts proliferated, but in which meaning gradually declined:

So vermehrte sich mit jedem Jahrhundert die Masse der Verstandes-Begriffe, und der Kreis des Wissens nahm immer mehr an Reichthum und Mannichfaltigkeit zu, verlor aber in demselben Maaße an Tiefe und Intensität. Was der Mensch ehemals auf einem Blick sah und ihm aus der

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<sup>51</sup> 'The Jewish tradition goes even further, and claims that Hebrew is the first *Ursprache*, which Adam spoke in paradise. Even though this should not be taken literally, as the *Ursprache* which mankind spoke in his spirituality before the Fall was of an entirely different nature from all languages which exist today, still, if the Bible is meant to be the book of divine revelation, the Hebrew language must be a weaker, incorporated, but still true impression of the that first, pure *Ursprache*. Because, just as mankind in his fallen state still carries the reflection of his erstwhile spiritual majesty, his language must at least have conserved the traces of this magical spirit of creation of the early *Ursprache*, which degenerated ever more in his descendants, the deeper the human race gradually sank.' (MI, 329-330).

unmittelbaren Anschauung verständlich war, mußte jetzt seinem Verstande in viele Begriffe zergliedert dargestellt werden.<sup>52</sup>

If we compare this to Benjamin's description of postlapsarian language, the similarity becomes very clear indeed:

Das Wort soll *etwas* mitteilen (außer sich selbst). Das ist wirklich der Sündenfall des Sprachgeistes. Das Wort als äußerlich mitteilendes, gleichsam eine Parodie des ausdrücklich mittelbaren Wortes auf das ausdrücklich unmittelbare, das schaffende Gotteswort, und der Verfall des seligen Sprachgeistes, des adamitischen, der zwischen ihnen steht.<sup>53</sup>

The crucial concept shared by these two descriptions is *Unmittelbarkeit*, immediacy, which sheds light on what are in essence the necessary *Grundtatsachen* of a language theory which models itself on a theological

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<sup>52</sup> 'Thus, with every century, the mass of intellectual concepts increased, and the sphere of knowledge increased ever more in richness and diversity, but lost depth and intensity to the same degree. What mankind used to see with one look and what used to be comprehensible to him from immediate contemplation, now had to be represented to his intellect, broken down into many concepts.' (MI, 189). In an earlier chapter of book one, Molitor uses the same word, *unmittelbar*, to describe how the Bible speaks (or spoke) to mankind (before the Fall into tradition): 'Allerdings ist es wahr, daß der Geist des Lebens aus der heiligen Schrifte unmittelbar zu uns spricht; allein welche reflexionslose, reine, ungetrübte und heilige Stimmung des Gemüths wird nicht auch erfordert, um diese göttliche Sprache recht zu verstehen [...] Es ist wahrlich eine große Täuschung zu glauben: man könne der Tradition gänzlich entbehren, [...]' (MI, 48).

<sup>53</sup> 'The word should communicate *something* (apart from itself). That is really the Fall of the spirit of language. The word as something externally communicating, a parody, as it were, by the expressly mediate [or indirect] word of the expressly immediate, the creative word of God, and the decay of the blessed spirit of language, the adamitic one, which stands between them.' (II, 153).

pattern. Benjamin will use the concept of *Unmittelbarkeit* to develop the contrasting notions of language as a *Mittel*, a means to an end, and language as a *Medium*, as we will discuss below.

In the long passage from *Philosophie der Geschichte* quoted above, Molitor mentions the ‘magischen Schöpfungsgeistes der frühern Ursprache’, the former, prelapsarian magic of language which still adheres in single traces to the postlapsarian human language. He reiterates this idea later, in the aforementioned seventh chapter, where he writes: ‘So wie das Wort der Ursprache ein reiner Abdruck des Gedankens ist, und das Wort ursprünglich selber eine magische Kraft hat, so war auch die Urschrift des Menschen, wie jegliches Werk und jegliche That, der figurirte Ausdruck des magischen Wortes, und darum selber magisch in ihren Wirkungen.’<sup>54</sup> The ‘magic’ Molitor

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<sup>54</sup> ‘Just as the word of the *Ursprache* is a pure imprint of thought, and the word itself originally has a magical power, the *Urschrift* [original writing] of mankind, like every work and every deed, was the figured expression of the magical word, and therefore itself magical in its effects.’ (MI, 341). Molitor explains the (residual) ‘magic’ of the *Urschrift* by establishing a continuity between divine language and writing and human language and writing (which he had described as ‘eine Nachbildung des göttlichen Redens und Schreibens’). In one paragraph, he brings together all these topoi and connects them to the Kabbalist doctrine which states that he who knows how to combine letters in the correct way, i.e. someone who understands the mystical import of *gematria* and *notarikon*, which we discussed in the first chapter, would be able to perform miracles: ‘So wie das Wort die Abbildung des Gedankens und die fünf Sprachwerkzeuge des Mundes die verleblichte Offenbarung der innern, Gedanken erzeugenden Grundthätigkeit des Geistes sind: so können die Formen und Gestalten der Urschrift nichts anders gewesen seyn, als der leiblich fixirte Abdruck der unterschiedlichen Bewegungen, die der Geist, mittelst seiner fünf leiblichen Sprachwerkzeuge hervorbringt; so daß also die Gestalten in der Natur die verborgenen Kräfte des denkenden Geistes offenbaren, wie die Gestalten in der Natur die verborgenen Kräfte des allmächtigen Schöpfers verkündigen. Wenn der Mensch als die kleine Welt ein Bild der großen göttlichen Welt, und die fünf Sprachorgane Abdrücke der fünf geistigen Principien sind, so muß auch das kleine menschliche Alphabet mit dem großen göttlichen in Uebereinstimmung stehen. Dadurch erhält jener so unverständlich klingenden Satz der Kabbalisten [...] seine Erklärung: daß die Buchstaben Abdrücke göttlicher Kräfte sind, daß Gott durch die Magie der

writes about is intimately linked to the creative power of the Word of God, which we mentioned above. God speaks, and what he has spoken comes into being. True to the Jewish doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, this means that nothing exists before language, that language is the *immediate* cause of creation and that everything must thus necessarily exist *in* language, and, as we said before, that language therefore *is* creation in both act and substance. This also sheds light on Benjamin's insistence that language is never a mere *Mittel* but always a *Medium*: language is not only the means by which God creates the world, it is also the medium in which the world exists.<sup>55</sup> In other words, because it is the divine language which creates the world from nothing, the creation itself is a form of language. It is this idea which lies at the basis of the notion of the 'book of the world', according to which the whole of creation, as does the whole of the Torah with which it was created, contains a divine message.<sup>56</sup> Benjamin's statement that the objects communicate themselves to mankind, so that the latter is able to name them, as was decreed by God, is fundamentally akin to this notion.<sup>57</sup> So much so, in fact, that towards the end of *Über Sprache*,

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Buchstaben Himmel und Erde erschaffen, und derjenige, welcher die Versetzung der Buchstaben verstehe, Wunder zu wirken im Stande wäre u.s.w.' (MI, 341-342).

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin expresses this linguistic omnipresence towards the end of *Über Sprache* in the following terms: 'Die Sprache eines Wesens ist das Medium, in dem sich sein geistiges Wesen mitteilt. Der ununterbrochene Strom dieser Mitteilung fließt durch die ganze Natur vom niedersten Existierenden bis zum Menschen und vom Menschen zum Gott.' (II, 157).

<sup>56</sup> In the words of Molitor: 'So sagen z.B. die heiligen Ambrosius und Prosper: "die Himmel seyen ein heiliges Buch mit Blättern und wunderbaren Instruktionen." [...] Die Möglichkeit das Buch der Natur richtig zu lesen, hat aber der Mensch, mit der Fähigkeit die innere Sprache Gottes zu verstehen, verloren; [...]' (MI, 340).

<sup>57</sup> (II, 143). Molitor's version of this idea is quite interesting: 'Dies Ausprägung der innern Idee in der äußern Gestalt, heißt überhaupt Schrift.' (MI, 340). If we replace 'der innern Idee' by 'des geistigen Wesens' and 'Schrift' by 'Sprache', this sentence would not look out of place in *Über Sprache*.

we find Molitor's description of 'die Spuren jenes magischen Schöpfungsgeistes', which are meant still to adhere to human language, echoed extremely closely as the 'Residuum des schaffenden Gotteswortes', which permeates the whole of nature as a mute, nameless language.<sup>58</sup> One interesting detail here is the slight shift in emphasis between these two phrases. Whereas Molitor talks about the 'Schöpfungsgeist', Benjamin prefers the term 'Gotteswort', and it is perhaps this detail which reveals Molitor as a Christian author and which confirms Benjamin's fundamental Jewishness. As became apparent from Benjamin's epistemological and methodological emphasis on the 'sprachliches Wesen' over the 'geistiges Wesen' in *Über Sprache*, the central category in his thought, theological or otherwise, must ultimately be language, *Sprache*, not *Geist*. Scholem, too, recognised this emphasis as a fundamentally Jewish character trait of Benjamin's philosophy, describing 'die tiefe Bindung des echten theologischen Denkens der Juden an die Sprache [...], wie sie immer wieder bei ihm zum Vorschein kommt.'<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> 'Der Mensch teilt sich Gott durch den Namen mit, den er der Natur und seinesgleichen (im Eigennamen) gibt, und der Natur gibt er den Namen nach der Mitteilung, die er von ihr empfängt, denn auch die ganze Natur ist von einer namenlosen stummen Sprache durchzogen, dem Residuum des schaffenden Gotteswortes, welches im Menschen als erkennender Name und über dem Menschen als richtendes Urteil schwebend sich erhalten hat.' (II, 157). This 'schaffende Gotteswort', which maintains itself *in* and suspended *over* mankind, in its turn echoes the hypothesis mentioned at the onset of *Über Sprache*, stating that the 'geistiges Wesen' of an object exists in its 'sprachliches Wesen', which, in the exact same words, is the abyss 'über [dem die Sprachtheorie] sich schwebend zu erhalten [hat].' (II, 141). It is clear by now that this particular paradoxical construction is the very core of Benjamin's language essay, and it is this construction which he would later hone to perfection in his concept of the *Dialektik im Stillstand*.

<sup>59</sup> '[...] the profound connection of the authentic theological thought of the Jews to language [...], as it continues to appear in his work.' (Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 219).

Benjamin's description of language differs from Molitor's in one respect only, yet it is an aspect which is absolutely crucial in understanding not only Benjamin's language theory, but in fact his entire work. Whereas Molitor approaches the subject from the perspective of human language, Benjamin characteristically approaches it from the perspective of the object. This is an emphasis which Benjamin would maintain throughout his work, from *Über Sprache* and *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* to *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* and his pieces on the figure of the collector, as well as the unfinished *Passagen-Werk* and the so-called *Haschisch-Protokolle*. Benjamin's focus on the object is nowhere more clear than in these *Haschisch-Protokolle*, where his emphasis with the objective perspective leads him to the 'verwunderte Notiz': 'Wie die Dinge den Blicken standhalten.'<sup>60</sup> This perspective is the profane complement of the theological concept of the 'book of the world', as mentioned by Molitor in *Philosophie der Geschichte*, and Benjamin was clearly aware of this. In the notes for the *Passagen-Werk*, a project which presented itself as an attempt to redeem the 'Abfall der Geschichte', the immense and ever increasing collection of outmoded and discarded commodities, Benjamin writes: 'Die Rede vom Buch der Natur weist darauf hin, daß man das Wirkliche wie einen Text lesen kann. So soll es hier mit der Wirklichkeit des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts gehalten werden. Wir schlagen das Buch des Geschehenen auf.'<sup>61</sup> It is in this project that the profane and the theological come together into the paradoxical fusion that is 'profane

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<sup>60</sup> 'How the objects withstand our looks.' (VI, 587 and IV, 416).



Erleuchtung', or as Scholem once phrased it so succinctly: 'Seine Einsichten sind die eines ins Profane verschlagenen Theologen.'<sup>62</sup> We shall discuss this in greater detail in the next section.

Let us here return briefly to the subject of the 'magic' of language. This magic, according to Molitor, derives firstly from the creative power of the word, from the fact that the language of God becomes the world, or in more christological terms, the word becomes flesh. In such a paradigm, as we shall discuss later, there can be neither mediation nor arbitrariness of the sign. There can, in fact, not even be a 'sign' as such: there must be a fundamental identity between language and world.<sup>63</sup> The best example of this, if we may be allowed another christological excursion, is the fact that Jesus was taken up into heaven with his earthly body. The word had become flesh, they were identical, hence there could no longer be a disjunction (The desire to separate the earthly, bodily Jesus from the heavenly, 'ethereal' Jesus was to be the cause of many heresies during the first centuries of the Christian church, most famously Eutychian Monophysitism, and of even more reinterpretations of the nature of Christ and man in later centuries under the influence of a neo-platonic dislike

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<sup>61</sup> 'The expression of the book of nature refers to the fact that reality can be read like a text. This is what should happen here with the reality of the nineteenth century. We open the book of the past.' [N 4, 2] (V, 580).

<sup>62</sup> 'His insights are those of a theologian lost in the profane.' (Gerschom Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin', p. 212).

<sup>63</sup> This is true whether we use the Saussurean, Peircean or Derridean definition of the sign as something which stands for something else in its absence: if a sign becomes incomprehensible with the (radical) absence of its referent, the latter would become a *conditio sine qua non* for the sign, which would then be indistinguishable from the referent. In either case, the sign as such ceases to exist.

of the body (Manicheaism and Albigensianism being the most dramatic).<sup>64</sup> The reason why these heresies were considered heretical was the fact that, in order both to deny the notion that the body of Christ ascended into heaven and to avoid a logical inconsistency, they tended in some form to deny the doctrine of the incarnation). Interestingly enough, Benjamin himself refers to this very same paradox of the Λόγος in his explanation of the difference between ‘sprachliches’ and ‘geistiges Wesen’, locating it at the very root of linguistic theory (and thus the most fundamental problem of language theory becomes again a fundamentally theological one):

Die Unterscheidung zwischen dem geistigen Wesen und dem sprachlichen, in dem es mitteilt, ist die ursprünglichste in einer sprachtheoretischen Untersuchung, und es scheint dieser Unterschied so unzweifelhaft zu sein, daß vielmehr die oft behauptete Identität zwischen dem geistigen und dem sprachlichen Wesen eine tiefe und unbegreifliche Paradoxie bildet, deren Ausdruck man in den Doppelsinn des Wortes Λόγος gefunden hat.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> See Williston Walker's *A History of the Christian Church*, fourth edition (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), pp. 173-180 and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine: Volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 256-277.

<sup>65</sup> ‘The distinction between the spiritual and the linguistic essence, in which it communicates, is the most original in a linguistic research programme, and this distinction appears to be so much beyond doubt, that the often claimed identity between spiritual and linguistic essence rather forms a profound and unintelligible paradox, the expression of which has been found in the ambiguity of the word Λόγος.’ (II, 141). The paradox of the Λόγος as proclaimed in the opening verses of the gospel according to John, is, in both senses of the word, the most *ursprüngliche* mystery of Christianity: ‘Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν

Benjamin captures the essentially theological nature of this paradox concerning the materiality of the sign and the ‘immateriality’ of meaning quite well, eventually extending the dichotomy of sign and meaning, or ‘sprachliches’ and ‘geistiges Wesen’, to philosophy and theology in *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*. It is impossible to think the two together, as they are as much mutually exclusive as mutually dependent (as all binary oppositions are), and yet, Benjamin says even in *Über Sprache*, this paradox should be set as the main task of thought as such: ‘[...] diese Ansicht als Hypothesis verstanden, ist der große Abgrund, dem alle Sprachtheorie zu verfallen droht, und über, gerade über ihm sich schwebend zu erhalten ist ihre Aufgabe.’<sup>66</sup>

When Benjamin discusses what he calls the ‘bürgerliche[n] Ansicht der

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θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν;’ (Joh. 1, 1-3). The opening words of the first verse, ‘Ἐν ἀρχῇ’, already suggest that the evangelist actually intended his words to stand at the origin, or rather that they were meant to echo and thus replace an older origin, namely the book that had started with the words בְּרֵאשִׁית. The concise passage can again be read as a statement of the linguistic essence or existence of God (and the Son), as we discussed it in our first chapter in relation to the vocalisation of the tetragrammaton. The concept of the λόγος, the Word incarnate, expresses the fundamental unity and identity of the Father and the Son, so profound that the λόγος, the Word or the Son, pre-exists the Father (but then the Father is the λόγος, according to the last statement of the first verse, and thus the paradox is itself suspended). Locating this paradox at the very origin of the faith is a way of circumnavigating the otherwise insoluble problem of the signifier/signified relationship, and by extension the problem of the relationship between *geistiges* and *sprachliches Wesen*. In fact, using these terms Benjamin comes closer to the original mystery of Christianity than to the Saussurean mystery of the signifier/signified relationship, as the Son, or λόγος, can be said to be the *sprachliches Wesen* of God, i.e. his *geistiges Wesen* insofar as it expresses itself, insofar as it becomes flesh.

<sup>66</sup> ‘[...] this view understood as an hypothesis is the great abyss to which all language theory threatens to fall victim, and to remain suspended over it, precisely over it, is its task.’ (II, 141).

Sprache',<sup>67</sup> according to which the relationship between the sign and the thing to which it is assigned rests solely on convention, he reverts to the same figure of the paradox, refusing to countenance the replacement of the 'bourgeois' view (perhaps the term 'anti-intellectual' or 'philistine' would be a better translation of 'bürgerlich', as Benjamin was, to all intents and purposes, still completely unaware of Marxism at this point) by a mystical theory of language. He opts instead for a third alternative constructed out of the suspension of the only two choices which seem available. Benjamin rejects the Saussurean *arbitraire du signe*: 'Die Sprache gibt niemals *bloße* Zeichen.'<sup>68</sup> Yet he does not support the view of straightforward language mysticism, according to which the word expresses the essence of the thing. The emphasis in the lapidary statement quoted above is on '*bloße*', not on 'Zeichen'. In other words, he does not deny that language is made up of signs, but he maintains that the relationship of these signs with their referents is less uncomplicated than *mere* representation. What Benjamin does here is to suspend us again over the abyss of a third, unknowable alternative, gaping between the two extremes of the bourgeois theory and the mystical view, between science and religion, between man and God. This third unknowable, in many ways typical of Benjamin, comes from the perspective of the object, and rests on the literally inconceivable notion that objects communicate their essence, bestowed on them by God, to mankind in their own mute language (again the – Wittgensteinian – paradox):

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<sup>67</sup> 'the bourgeois view of language' (II, 150).

[...] die Sache an sich [hat] kein Wort [...], geschaffen ist sie aus Gottes Wort und erkannt in ihrem Namen nach dem Menschenwort. Diese Erkenntnis der Sache ist aber nicht spontane Schöpfung, sie geschieht nicht aus der Sprache absolut uneingeschränkt und unendlich wie diese; sondern es beruht der Name, den der Mensch der Sache gibt, darauf, wie sie ihm mitteilt. Im Namen ist das Wort Gottes nicht schaffend geblieben, es ist an einem Teil empfangend, wenn auch sprachempfangend, geworden. Auf die Sprache der Dinge selbst, aus denen wiederum lautlos und in der stummen Magie der Natur das Wort Gottes hervorstrahlt, ist diese Empfängnis gerichtet.<sup>69</sup>

Mankind's assignation of signs cannot be an arbitrary activity because man does not *have* language *stricto sensu*. Mankind exists *in* language, language is its medium, in the same way as truth exists *in* language but can never be communicated *through* it. Language is bestowed upon humankind by God, and the 'sprachliches Wesen' which this language will express can only be expressed after the objects which human language names have communicated their 'geistiges Wesen' to mankind. Thus mankind finds itself suspended over the epistemological abyss between an unknowable God and an unknowable

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<sup>68</sup> 'Language never gives *mere* signs.' (II, 150).

<sup>69</sup> 'the object as such does not have a word, it is created out of God's word and recognised in its name after the human word. This knowledge of the object, however, is not spontaneous creation, it does not come forth from language in an unlimited way or as infinite as language itself; but the name which man gives to the object is based on how the latter communicates itself to him. In the name, the word of God did not remain creative, but became partly receptive, if receptive to language. This receptivity is aimed at the language of objects itself, from which the word of God shines, again soundlessly and in the mute magic of nature.' (II, 150).

objective essence, without which, nevertheless, meaning as such is necessarily inconceivable and inexpressible. God ensures that language is able to *mean* and the object ensures that language is able to mean *something*. If it would be possible to detach language from its guarantors, God and world, language would not signify and would signify nothing, an idea which, as Benjamin himself said, cannot be made fruitful. Or *wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen*.

A similar notion is expressed by Molitor when he describes the prelapsarian stage of human existence as a 'Seyn und Leben [...] in einer realen aber harmonischen Natur, für die es weder Nothwendigkeit noch Willkühr gab, sondern alles eine reine reflexionslose That war.'<sup>70</sup> If we apply this pattern to the question of language and meaning, we are led to the same conclusion reached by Benjamin of an excluded, unnamed third alternative. Language is neither a question of *Nothwendigkeit*, i.e. given by God to mankind without the latter having any hand in the matter, nor is it a question of *Willkühr*, of mankind simply assigning names to objects on its own account. If we reject both God, *Nothwendigkeit*, and man, *Willkühr*, as the source of language, it must necessarily originate from a third source, namely the object itself. In this respect, it is interesting that Molitor should have described the behaviour of mankind as 'eine reine reflexionslose That', emphasising receptivity rather than intention. In fact, a subsequent discussion by Molitor of the concept of arbitrariness is particularly enlightening in this matter, as he writes:

Die Urschrift bestand daher eben so wenig aus willkürlichen Zeichen, als die Ursprache aus willkürlichen Tönen; so wie es denn an sich gar keine willkürlichen Töne und Zeichen giebt, sondern alle Töne, Formen und Gestalten der Ausdruck gewisser Ideen und Qualitäten sind, und also Leben und Wirksamkeit in sich haben. Doch beruhet ihre Wirkung stets auf der Intention des Wirkenden, und auf dem Rapport und Empfänglichkeit dessen, auf den die Wiking gerichtet ist.<sup>71</sup>

This passage, quite deceptively, may sound as if Molitor is simply restating the received opinion of traditional language mysticism, saying that there is no such thing as an arbitrary sign (which is in itself a deceptive formulation, as *l'arbitraire du signe* does not refer to the sign, but to the relationship between signifier and signified). But on closer inspection, we find that Molitor is in fact talking about nature as a signifier. On the previous page, he had defined the whole of nature, visible and invisible, as a sign: 'Alle Formen in der äußern Natur sind lauter göttliche Schriftzüge, die ganze sichtbare Natur ist die eingegrabene Schrift Gottes oder das äußere schriftlich offenbarte Wort, das mündliche hingegen ist bloß innerlich im Geiste vernehmbar.'<sup>72</sup> This entails

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<sup>70</sup> 'a being and life in a real but harmonious nature, to which there is neither necessity nor arbitrariness, but everything was a pure, unreflecting deed.' (MI, 135).

<sup>71</sup> 'The original writing therefore did not consist of arbitrary signs, just as little as the original language consisted of arbitrary tones; just as there are no arbitrary tones and signs as such, but all tones, forms and figures are the expressions of certain ideas and qualities, and thus have life and effectiveness in themselves. Yet their effect always rests on the intention of the active party and on the rapport and the receptivity of the party towards which the effect is directed.' (MI, 341).

<sup>72</sup> 'All forms in external nature are merely divine writing, the entire visible nature is the engraved writing of God or the external word, revealed in writing, the oral word, on the other hand, is only perceptible internally in the spirit.' (MI, 340).

that the 'Intention des Wirkenden' of the previous passage actually refers to nature, in other words to the object, and the 'Rapport und Empfänglichkeit' commensurate to this intention thus refers to mankind. This necessarily leads us to the conclusion that, in Molitor's view, too, the object communicates itself to mankind, which then proceeds to name it.<sup>73</sup> One important difference between Molitor's version and Benjamin's is that the former suggests that it is in fact God who is communicating himself to mankind through nature, whereas Benjamin's essay appears to leave the role of God open in this respect, choosing instead to concentrate on the medium, *Sprache überhaupt*. Yet this does not necessarily mean that Molitor and Benjamin are incompatible on this

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<sup>73</sup> In volume four of *Philosophie der Geschichte*, Molitor reiterates this idea of an objective language translated by human perception: 'Die Ahnung eines innern, verborgenen, qualitativen, magischen Lebens in dem Seyn der Wesen erweckt in uns jenes namenlose wunderbare Gefühl, das wir bei'm Anblick der Natur empfinden. Auf diesem Gefühle beruht eigentlich die ganze Poesie und symbolische Sprache; nie würde der Mensch darauf gekommen seyn, in den äußern Dingen Symbole innerer unsichtbarer Verhältnisse zu erblicken, so er nicht durch ein dunkles, doch aber ganz bestimmtes Gefühl geleitet worden wäre, daß dem äußern quantitativen Seyn ein inneres qualitatives magisches Leben zu Grunde liege, und das objektive Aeußere der theils bewußte, theils bewußtlose Ausdruck einer mehr oder weniger tiefen innerlichen Lebenssubjektivität sey. – Dies dunkle ahnende Gefühl einer allgemeinen Lebenssubjektivität in der Natur, welches der Urwelt in so hohem Grade eigen gewesen, zur größern Klarheit des Begriffes zu erheben, ist der Gegenstand der wissenschaftlichen Mystik, deren Begründung, und damit die höhere Wiedergeburt der gesammten Wissenschaft der kommenden Zeit vorbehalten zu seyn scheint.' (*M* IV, 252). Molitor's 'dunkle ahnende Gefühl' of a continuous qualitative life underlying the quantitative phenomenology of nature, which may be grasped in the 'Klarheit des Begriffes' by the 'Wissenschaft der kommenden Zeit' is echoed extremely closely in Benjamin's essay *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*: 'Für den vertieften Begriff der Erfahrung ist aber, wie schon gesagt, Kontinuität nächst der Einheit unerläßlich und in den Ideen muß der Grund der Einheit und der Kontinuität jener nicht vulgären und nicht nur wissenschaftlichen sondern metaphysischen Erfahrung aufgewiesen werden.' (II, 167). In this essay, Benjamin seems to have answered Molitor's call to elevate the intuition of unity into the clarity of a concept, and this concept is experience, as summarised in the concluding *Lehrsatz*: 'Erfahrung ist die einheitliche und kontinuierliche Mannichfaltigkeit der Erkenntnis.' (II, 168).



point, on the contrary, the latter's shift of emphasis is merely dictated by his own distinction between *geistiges Wesen* and *sprachliches Wesen*. When Benjamin apparently refuses to talk about God as such, this is merely because, according to his own definition, God's essence, his *geistiges Wesen*, can only be known insofar as it expresses itself in language and thus becomes his *sprachliches Wesen*, his linguistic essence. This retreat of God into language or into the essence of language is a characteristically Jewish turn of thought. As we saw in chapter one, catachretically, the Talmud needs only the letter *heth* to conclude that God lives in the heights of the wor[l]d. It is partly this very doctrine of the linguistic essence of God which, according to Benjamin, explained why the name of God was conspicuously absent from Kafka's work – and indeed his own: 'Es wurde darauf hingewiesen, daß im ganzen Werke Kafkas der Name "Gott" nicht vorkommt. [...] Wer nicht versteht, was Kafka den Gebrauch dieses Namens verbietet, versteht von ihm keine Zeile.'<sup>74</sup>

Yet Benjamin is far from silent on this subject, although he too, prompted by the prohibition generated by his own thought as much as by the Jewish tradition, religiously avoids addressing the name of God, reverting instead to speculations about the Word of God or about his 'sprachliches Wesen'. In *Über Sprache* he expounds a doctrine, which we quoted above, which is in fact extremely similar to the one found in *Philosophie der Geschichte*: 'Im Namen ist das Wort Gottes nicht schaffend geblieben, es ist an einem Teil empfangend, wenn auch sprachempfangend, geworden. Auf die Sprache der

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<sup>74</sup> 'It has been pointed out that the name "God" does not occur anywhere in the whole of Kafka's work. [...] Anyone who does not understand what stops Kafka from using this name, does not understand a single line of him.' (II, 1219, see also 8, note 11).

Dinge selbst, aus denen wiederum lautlos und in der stummen Magie der Natur das Wort Gottes hervorstrahlt, ist diese Empfängnis gerichtet.’<sup>75</sup> In this passage, Benjamin says that the word of God shines forth in the ‘mute magic of nature’, and it is this ‘word of God’ which he himself defined on the previous page of *Über Sprache* as ‘Gottes sprachliches Wesen’.<sup>76</sup> This means, in other words, that in Benjamin’s view, too, nature is the expression of God’s essence insofar as it can be known to mankind, just as Molitor states in *Philosophie der Geschichte*. Still there remains an important distinction between Benjamin and Molitor, which, as we mentioned before, the former’s emphasis on language as the focal point of his essay: *Wort* and not *Geist*. God, to continue the pictorial metaphor, is the vanishing point of *Über Sprache*, knowable only in his effects, which are necessarily *sprachlich*. Even in his description of the word of God as it shines forth in nature, Benjamin stresses the fact that we have to go through, or rather *into* language. The very word of God becomes *sprachempfangend*: after creation, language passes into the hands of mankind in the form of the names which mankind gives to creation, and these names, as we said before, are translations from the mute language of objects into human language. In Molitor’s version, it is mankind which becomes receptive to the language of nature. In Benjamin’s account, it is the word of God which becomes receptive, *through* mankind fulfilling its task to name creation. This slight shift in emphasis deeply embeds God into language, more so than is the case in *Philosophie der Geschichte*. Language becomes the medium of existence as such. And this is the magic of (divine) language which pervades language as

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<sup>75</sup> II, 150; on Molitor’s version of this doctrine, see also note 58 above.

such: the world is created in language and continues to exist in language. Human language, as a naming language, still has traces of this magic because it was bestowed on humankind by God, and because the task of naming and thus completing creation is a God-given task. Language, in other words, is magical because of its immediacy and ubiquity, because it *is* and because it is everything and everywhere. Or in the words of Benjamin himself:

[...] jede Sprache teilt sich *in* sich selbst mit, sie ist im reinsten Sinne das "Medium" der Mitteilung. Das Mediale, das ist die *Unmittelbarkeit* aller geistigen Mitteilung, ist das Grundproblem der Sprachtheorie, und wenn man diese Unmittelbarkeit magisch nennen will, so ist das Urproblem der Sprache ihre Magie. Zugleich deutet das Wort von der Magie der Sprache auf ein anderes: auf ihre Unendlichkeit. Sie ist durch die Unmittelbarkeit bedingt. Denn gerade, weil *durch* die Sprache sich nichts mitteilt, kann, was *in* der Sprache sich mitteilt, nicht von außen beschränkt oder gemessen werden, und darum wohnt jeder Sprache ihre inkommensurable einziggeartete Unendlichkeit inne. Ihr sprachliches Wesen, nicht ihre verbalen Inhalte bezeichnen ihre Grenze.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> 'Im Wort wurde geschaffen, und Gottes sprachliche Wesen ist das Wort.' (II, 149).

<sup>77</sup> '[... ] every language communicates itself in itself, it is in the purest sense the "Medium" of the communication. The medium [*das Mediale*], that is the *immediacy* of all spiritual communication, is the fundamental problem of language theory, and if one should wish to call this immediacy magical, then the fundamental problem [*Urproblem*] of language is its magic. At the same time, the statement of the magic of language indicates another one: its infinity. This is determined by the immediacy. Because exactly while nothing communicates itself *through* language, nothing which communicates itself *in* language can be limited or measured from the outside, and that is why every language possesses its own unique incommensurable infinity. Its 'sprachliches Wesen', not its verbal contents describe its limits.' (II, 142-143).

This concept of 'Medium' is, in the most theological sense of the word, the 'mystery' of Benjamin's language essay. 'Die Sprache eines Wesens ist das Medium, in dem sich sein geistiges Wesen mitteilt.'<sup>78</sup> It is this concept, as the attribute of language, which the essay circumnavigates – as we phrased it before. The reason for this circumnavigating, *umkreisende*, strategy is that the concept of 'Medium' is essentially a theological one, and, in a way, a divine one. It designates not only the sphere of existence of language, but also the sphere of existence of God. God, like truth and like language, cannot be grasped, named, pinpointed, located or acquired. To say that God has attributes – as we said of language a few sentences ago – is impossible. Thus it also becomes impossible to posit any attributes of language as such, because the original Language, *Sprache überhaupt*, from which all forms of language derive, is also divine: this is why we have to continue to circumnavigate, delay and deny, rather than state. One of the most fundamental tenets of Jewish theology is that it is both prohibited and impossible to state anything else about God apart from his existence, which is not an attribute but a state, *Sein*. This leads the Jewish tradition into the most intricate and simple paradox of human thought – so much so that naming this paradox requires a paradox, so it becomes a tautology – which is the *Inbegriff*, the quintessence, of theological thought as such. God becomes everything and nothing, both and neither at the same time. And it is this paradox which Benjamin, wittingly or unwittingly, explores in *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* as

well as in *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, to which we will now turn our attention.

In November 1917, a year after writing *Über Sprache* and six months after acquiring *Philosophie der Geschichte*, Benjamin starts writing *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, a text which is in many ways the metaphysical counterpart to the earlier language essay. *Über das Programm* represents Benjamin's first and only thorough *Auseinandersetzung* with Kant, and, characteristically, it is rather more impressionistic than scholarly. Benjamin appears to have been greatly impressed by the style of Kant's writings, expressing his conviction that Kant's prose represents 'einen limes der hohen Kunstprosa'<sup>78</sup>. But, more importantly, Benjamin consistently defines Kant's philosophy in terms of the elusive concept of the *Lehre*. In Benjamin's 'traditional' view, all forms of human intellectual endeavour appear as different manifestations of, and perspectives on the great viscous whole that is tradition, an eminently Jewish concept. Even, and this is perhaps the most striking point – which names Benjamin as 'legitimer Fortsetzer der fruchtbarsten und echten Traditionen {eines Molitors}', to paraphrase Scholem – such at first sight radically heterogeneous manifestations as the philosophy of Kant and the collages of the Surrealists are seen in the light of the *Lehre*. 'Benjamin,' Scholem writes,

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<sup>78</sup> 'The language of a being is the medium in which its *geistiges Wesen* communicates itself.' (II, 157).

<sup>79</sup> 'a limit of high artistic prose' (GB I, 390). It is tempting to think that this description foreshadows the concept of integral prose, which Benjamin develops quite a few years

sind Mystiker und Satiriker, Humanisten und Lyriker, Gelehrte und Monomanen gleicherweise der philosophische Versenkung wert. Unversehens geht dabei die Betrachtung vom Profanen ins Theologische über, spürt er doch die genauen Konturen des Theologischen noch da, wo es vollends ins gänzlich Weltliche aufgelöst erscheint.<sup>80</sup>

Much as Molitor, perhaps for strategic purposes, refused to recognise Judaism and Christianity as discreet and distinct entities, as we discussed extensively in the previous chapter, Benjamin refuses to acknowledge the idea of the division of labour which had been creeping into the fields of the humanities and sciences since the Enlightenment, and which he attributes to a Neo-kantian misreading of the intention of Kant's system.<sup>81</sup> To him, there remained one

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later; Benjamin's description of Kant's prose is in the context of the *Lehre*, which is essentially an early permutation of integral prose itself.

<sup>80</sup> 'To Benjamin, mystics and satirists, humanists and lyricists, scholars and obsessive maniacs were all worthy of philosophical contemplation. Its meditation passes unnoticed from the profane into the theological, and he still manages to trace the exact contours of the theological, even when it appears to have dissolved entirely into worldliness.' (Gershom Scholem, 'Walter Benjamin', p. 206). In the same essay, Scholem characterises the unmistakable importance of the idea of the *Lehre* to Benjamin as follows: 'Zwei Kategorien sind es vor allem, die in seinen Schriften immer wieder im Zentrum auftauchen, und, wie ich sagte, gerade in ihren jüdischen Fassungen: einmal die Offenbarung, die Idee der Tora, die Vorstellung von der Lehre und von heiligen Texten überhaupt, und zum anderen der Messianismus und die Erlösung. Die Bedeutung, die sie als regulative Ideen seines Denkens besaßen und die einer eigenen Analyse in der Tiefe wert wäre, kann nicht überschätzt werden.' (pp. 220-221).

<sup>81</sup> 'Es bestand sicherlich bei Kant eine Tendenz gegen die Zerfällung und Aufteilung der Erfahrung in die einzelnen Wissenschaftsgebiete und wenn ihr auch die spätere Erkenntnistheorie den Rekurs auf die Erfahrung im gewöhnlichen Sinne, wie er bei Kant vorliegt, wird abschneiden müssen, so ist doch andererseits im Interesse der Kontinuität der Erfahrung ihre Darstellung als das System der Wissenschaften wie sie der Neukantianismus gibt noch mangelhaft und es muß in der Metaphysik die Möglichkeit gefunden werden ein reines systematisches Erfahrungskontinuum zu bilden; ja ihre eigentliche Bedeutung scheint hierin zu suchen zu sein.' (II, 164).

overarching principle, one 'Αρχή, which united even the most disparate manifestations of thought, and that was the medium in which thought as such, by definition, had to exist: *die Lehre*. In a letter dated 22 October 1917, less than a month before the composition of *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, Benjamin's correspondence again seems to bear witness to intense mental activity, as it had the year before. Admitting that he does not yet have any proof for his intuitions, he nevertheless states, with the same doctrinal authority that spoke from *Über Sprache*:

In der Tat sehe ich nur die Aufgabe wie ich sie eben umschrieben habe klar vor mir daß das *Wesentliche* des Kantischen Denkens zu erhalten sei. Worin dieses Wesentliche besteht und wie man sein System neu gründen muß um es hervortreten zu lassen weiß ich bis heute nicht. Aber es ist meine Überzeugung: wer nicht in Kant *das Denken der Lehre selbst* ringen fühlt und wer daher nicht mit äußerster Ehrfurcht ihn mit seinem Buchstaben als ein tradendum, zu Überlieferndes erfaßt (wie weit man ihn auch später umbilden müsse) weiß von Philosophie garnichts.<sup>82</sup>

The two most crucial elements in the project that became *Über das Programm* are, firstly, the intimate connection between philosophy and the *Lehre* which

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<sup>82</sup> 'Indeed I can only clearly see the task before me as I have just described it, that the *essence* of Kantian thought is to be retained. What this essence consists of and how one would have to re-establish his system in order to let this come to the fore, I do not know as yet. But it is my firm conviction: whoever does not feel *the thinking of the Lehre itself* struggling in Kant's work and whoever does not therefore consider him and his letter with the utmost reverence as a tradendum, something to be handed down

Benjamin attempts to establish, and which will – embryonically at least – take the form of *philosophia ancilla doctrinae*, and secondly Benjamin's firm belief that philosophy must be able to accommodate all manner of experience without renouncing its claim to speak with the certainty of 'systematic unity or', in other words, 'truth'<sup>83</sup>. This claim to speak in truth, as we discussed before and will continue to explore later, automatically brings philosophy into a theological frame of mind, and the argument of *Über das Programm* will be no exception. *Das Denken der Lehre*, the 'thinking of the doctrine', becomes the metaphor for a form of thought which is, in a sense, disembodied from both subject and object, a form of thinking which is essentially the same as the *Gedankenbewegung* of the Jewish tradition.

In May 1918, when Scholem visited Benjamin in Bern, much of their conversation was still centred on *Über das Programm*, and particularly the concept of experience which Benjamin elaborates in this text. At that point Benjamin formulated the following, according to Scholem, 'extreme' definition: 'Eine Philosophie, die nicht die Möglichkeit der Weissagung aus dem *Kaffeesatz* einbezieht und explizieren kann, kann keine wahre sein.'<sup>84</sup> This 'extreme' formulation is also extremely straightforward. Truth, as we have reiterated *ad nauseam*, is an intentionless being. Any philosophy which claims to speak in truth must therefore *be* in truth, it must partake of the sphere which

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(however much he would have to be reorganised later) knows absolutely nothing about philosophy.' (GB I, 389; Benjamin's emphasis).

<sup>83</sup> 'Je unabsehbarer und kühner die Entfaltung der kommenden Philosophie sich ankündigt, desto tiefer muß sie nach Gewißheit ringen deren Kriterium die systematische Einheit oder die Wahrheit ist.' (II, 158).



is truth. This seemingly mystical conception of philosophy becomes far more lucid when we connect the concepts of truth and experience. This connection is nowhere more obvious than in the essay *Erfahrung und Armut*, written in 1933, which opens with the following parable:

In unseren Lesebüchern stand die Fabel vom alten Mann, der auf dem Sterbebette den Söhnen weismacht, in seinem Weinberg sei ein Schatz verborgen. Sie sollten nur nachgraben. Sie gruben, aber kein Spur von Schatz. Als jedoch der Herbst kommt, trägt der Weinberg wie kein anderer im ganzen Land. Da merken sie, der Vater gab ihnen eine Erfahrung mit: Nicht im Golde steckt der Segen, sondern im Fleiß.<sup>85</sup>

As was the case with *Über Sprache*, this opening paragraph mimics the form of the tradition which it discusses. It refers to an untraceable source, but, crucially, it mentions a source, thereby labelling this parable as ‘überliefertes Wissen’, which in turn becomes ‘überlieferbar’, according to Benjamin’s own definition of traditional knowledge (which we will quote later on in this chapter). As we have seen in the first chapter, this sense of continuity is of supreme importance in the Jewish tradition, as it preserves the integrity, on a physical as well as on a spiritual level, of revelation, regardless of whether this

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<sup>84</sup> ‘A philosophy which cannot include and explain the possibility of foretelling the future from *coffee grounds* cannot be a true philosophy.’ (Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 77).

<sup>85</sup> ‘Our textbooks contained the fable of the old man who, on his deathbed, tells his sons that a treasure is hidden in his vineyard. They have only to dig for it. They dug, but no trace of treasure. Yet when autumn comes, the vineyard carries fruit like no

is strictly philologically justified. Benjamin himself was well aware of this, as he wrote in one of the notes for the *Passagen-Werk*: 'Mag sein, daß die Kontinuität der Tradition Schein ist. Aber dann stiftet eben die Beständigkeit dieses Scheins der Beständigkeit die Kontinuität in ihr.'<sup>86</sup> By the same token, the people of which the parable speaks remain unnamed, although they are entirely plausible. In other words, they *could* be real, even though the unspoken convention of the parable is that its protagonists are subservient to the story and therefore remain emblematic, or perhaps rather symptomatic. But most importantly, this parable illustrates what Benjamin said sixteen years earlier about the nature of truth and experience. Truth, let us say it once more, cannot be had, it can only *be*. This is illustrated perfectly by the parable, which circumnarrates the point it wants to make, the experience it wants to bring across, the truth it seeks to reveal, without actually stating it. There is no point even in this very short parable where the truth or the experience can be situated: its image grows in its telling. Benjamin uses the same organic metaphor to describe how Kafka's stories unfold: 'Kafkas Parabeln entfalten sich aber [...] wie die Knospe zur Blüte wird.'<sup>87</sup> What Kafka's stories 'unfold', Benjamin says, is 'die wolkige Stelle in ihrem Innern'. They intimate a mystery

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other in all the land. Then they notice that their father gave them an experience: rewards are not to be found in gold, but in diligence.' (II, 213-214).

<sup>86</sup> 'It may be so that the continuity of tradition is only apparent. But then it is precisely the consistency of this appearance of consistency which establishes the continuity within it.' [N 19,1] (V, 609).

<sup>87</sup> 'Kafka's parables, however, unfold [...] like the bud into the blossom.' (II, 420). As we mentioned in the previous chapter, Molitor uses the exact same metaphor to describe the tense genealogical relationship between Judaism and Christianity: 'Judenthum und Christenthum verhalten sich wie Knospe und Blüte, was in dem einen noch verschlossen liegt, ist in dem andern durch die Sonne des Lebens in reicher herrlicher Fülle aufgegangen.' (MI, 313).

hidden deep within, with the added complication in Kafka's case, as we suggested before, that we no longer possess the *Lehre* which his parables are supposed to illustrate: 'Besitzen wir die Lehre aber [...]? Sie ist nicht da; wir können höchstens sagen, daß dies und jenes auf sie anspielt.'<sup>88</sup> This is particularly true in the case of Benjamin's parable, as the lesson 'nicht im Golde steckt der Segen, sondern im Fleiß' is manifestly not the point, which is to illustrate the concept of experience. And even the illustration of the concept of experience can be said to be subordinate to the subliminal, perhaps even esoteric aim of the passage, which seems to be to hint at the form of truth as such, a treasure of a different, less palpable kind, which reveals and manifests itself in the passage. In *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Benjamin called truth, with a wonderfully clear yet entirely untranslatable expression, 'ein Sich-Darstellendes', something which represents, manifests or establishes itself.<sup>89</sup> This is why the quotation from Benjamin's Kafka-essay is particularly apt in the context of the parable, as we cannot 'possess' the *Lehre* or the truth by its very nature. If, Benjamin seems to suggest, truth does not feel like being

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<sup>88</sup> II, 420. See N.

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin makes this statement in the context of the object of *Erkenntnis*, of which he writes: 'Ihm bleibt der Besitzcharakter. Diesem Besitztum ist Darstellung sekundär. Es existiert nichts bereits als ein Sich-Darstellendes. Gerade dies aber gilt von der Wahrheit.' (I, 209). The difference between a reward that can be had, a treasure, and a much more valuable reward which eludes possession, experience, is indeed apparent in Benjamin's parable from *Der Erzähler*. But there is a further complication in Benjamin's definition of truth as 'ein Sich-Darstellendes', namely his insistence that it does not exist (already). This leads us to a fairly crucial point in Benjamin's *Lehre*, which we have been unable to discuss in any great detail, and that is the fact that even though Benjamin does provide us with definitions of truth, true experience and the *Lehre*, it does not necessarily mean that they are accessible to us, or that they exist as such. But, as he himself said on a similar topic about Kafka: 'Wer nicht versteht, was Kafka den Gebrauch dieses Namens [Gott] verbietet, versteht von ihm keine Zeile.' (II, 1219).

revealed, it will not be revealed. The way to touch upon the *Lehre* must be through references, illustrations or hints, in the words of Molitor: ‘dunkeln Bildern, und geheimnisvollen Winken’.<sup>90</sup> This concept of truth may also in part explain the importance of the Jewish or, to a lesser extent, Judaeo-Christian tradition to Benjamin’s theory of knowledge and experience. As we indicated above, the Jewish tradition is often at pains to retrace its links to revelation, thereby establishing a tangible continuity and effectively preserving the *Wahrheitsgehalt* of revelation within itself. This means that all knowledge which can be recognised as ‘überliefert’ will speak with the authority of revelation, but it also means that retracing the gradual expansion of tradition since its inception, study, becomes a religious duty. Or as Benjamin wrote in the notes to the *Passagen-Werk*: ‘Methode ist Umweg’, the detour through the strict propaedeutic that is tradition. The delaying strategies of the *Passagen-Werk* have often been interpreted as an influence of modernist and surrealist techniques such as montage and collage, but it can quite justifiably be seen as a direct consequence of working with traditional and theological concepts, which, as we already saw and will discuss further below, either simply preclude the direct statement or make it impossible without its mirror opposite – because all is contained within tradition.

In a letter to Scholem dated 6 September 1917, approximately two months before the composition of *Über das Programm*, Benjamin draws the strands of truth, experience and education together in the eminently Jewish concept of the *Lehre*. Again, truth cannot be located in any particular communication or

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<sup>90</sup> *MI*, 47-48; see note 27 above.

example given by the teacher to the pupil, rather it exists in the activity of the *Lehre*, in the ambiguity of the German word *lehren*: 'Wenn man also sagt der Lehrer gibt das "Beispiel" zum Lernen so verdeckt man durch den Begriff Beispiel das Eigentümliche, Autonome im Begriff solchen Lernens: nämlich das Lehren.'<sup>91</sup> Any translation of the words *lernen* and *lehren*, *study* and *teach*, must necessarily be deceptive, as neither of these terms refers to a one-sided activity. *Lernen* to the Jew designates the engagement with the text within tradition, or rather the engagement with the text that is tradition. Benjamin himself used the word to describe his reading of Molitor and Baader, whose works he wanted to have in front of him simultaneously, writing to Scholem 'anders kann ich nicht lernen.'<sup>92</sup> As we discussed in the first chapter, the Jewish concept of study, *lernen*, does not refer to a silent and solitary reading of a text, but to a communal activity in which the teacher, the *Lehrer*, learns as much as his pupils. It does not refer to the passing on of quantifiable information, readily available to the teacher, to ignorant pupils. The verb *lernen* in this (Jewish) context does have an object, but this (grammatical) object cannot be objectified, partly because it cannot be named. In *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Scholem defines the 'object' of the *Lehre* not as 'den

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<sup>91</sup> 'So when one says that the teacher gives the "example" to study, the concept of example conceals the peculiarity, the autonomy in the concept of such a form of study: namely the teaching.' (GB I, 382). This crucial letter, which was written in response to one of Scholem's essays on education and the Jewish youth movement, also contains an indication of the importance Benjamin attached to the concept of tradition, which he sees as far more important than the subordinate concept of 'Beispiel', as he admonishes Scholem: 'Ich wünschte mir daß Sie in der Ausarbeitung Ihres Aufsatzes den Begriff des Beispiels dergestalt eliminierten und zwar in dem der tradition aufheben möchten.' (GB I, 382). We will come back to Benjamin's *Auseinandersetzung* with the concept of tradition later in this chapter.

<sup>92</sup> GB I, 357. See chapter two, note 3.

wahren Stand und Weg des Menschen in der Welt', but as 'den transkausalen Zusammenhang der Dinge und ihr Verfaßtsein in Gott'.<sup>93</sup> The *Lehre*, in other words, does not communicate information, it reveals ideas. *Lernen* and *lehren*, the same 'ringen des Denken der Lehre' which Benjamin detected in the writings of Kant, refer to an activity which will reveal truth, a truth which is not sought but granted. The metaphor which is often used in this context is that of a journey on which both teacher and pupil embark, and which would not necessarily lead them where they thought they were going.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, if teacher and pupils were ready for it, once they had cultivated, in the words of Molitor, 'jenen wahren, hehren Ernst, jene Gründlichkeit und reine, innere Liebe für seinen Gegenstand',<sup>95</sup> their *Umwege* through the text would lead them to a revelation, in the same way as the three sons learned of the blessings of toil on their quest for easy money.

In the same letter to Scholem, Benjamin gives an uncharacteristically precise and very eloquent definition of the terms *Lehre*, education and tradition, and how these relate to one another. The words and images he uses

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<sup>93</sup> In *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Scholem describes the relevance of this Jewish concept of the *Lehre* to Benjamin as follows: 'In diesen Jahren, zwischen 1915 und mindestens 1927, nahm die religiöse Sphäre für Benjamin eine dem grundsätzlichen Zweifel durchaus entrückte zentrale Bedeutung ein, in deren Mittelpunkt der Begriff der "Lehre" stand, die für ihn den philosophischen Bereich zwar einschloß, aber durchaus transzendierte. In seinen Frühschriften kommt er immer wieder auf diesen Begriff zurück, den er im Sinne der ursprünglichen Bedeutung des hebräischen "Tora" als "Unterweisung" verstand, Unterweisung nicht über den wahren Stand und Weg des Menschen in der Welt, sondern über den transkausalen Zusammenhang der Dinge und ihr Verfaßtsein in Gott verstand. Es hatte mit seinem, immer stärker eine mystische Note annehmenden Begriff von Tradition viel zu tun.' (p. 73).

<sup>94</sup> Molitor discusses this concept in book one of *Philosophie der Geschichte*, where he explains the term for rabbinical students, *Chabberim*, as 'Gefährten', literally meaning 'companions on a journey' (MI, 185 ff.).

<sup>95</sup> MI, 7. See the previous chapter, note 84.

are quite poignant in our present context, hence it seems well worth to quote the passage in full:

Ich bin überzeugt: die Tradition ist das Medium in dem sich *kontinuierlich* der Lernende in den Lehrenden verwandelt und das im ganzen Umfang der Erziehung. In der Tradition sind alle Erziehende und zu Erziehende und alles ist Erziehung. Symbolisiert und zusammengefaßt werden diese Verhältnisse in der Entwicklung der Lehre. Wer nicht gelernt hat kann nicht erziehen denn er sieht nicht an welcher Stelle er einsam ist, wo er also auf seine Weise die Tradition umfaßt und lehrend mitteilbar macht. Wer sein Wissen als überliefertes begriffen hat in dem allein wird es überlieferbar, er wird in unerhörter Weise frei. Hier denke ich mir den metaphysischen Ursprung des talmudischen Witzes. Die Lehre ist wie ein wogendes Meer, für die Welle aber (wenn wir sie als Bild des Menschen nehmen) kommt alles darauf an sich seiner Bewegung so hinzugeben, daß sie bis zum Kamm wächst und herüberstürzt mit Schäumen. Diese ungeheure Freiheit des Übersturzes ist die Erziehung, im eigentlichen: Der Unterricht, das Sichtbar- und *frei* werden der Tradition: ihr Überstürzen aus lebendiger Fülle. Es ist so schwer über Erziehung zu reden weil deren Ordnung mit der Religiösen Ordnung der Tradition ganz zusammenfällt. Erziehen ist nur (im Geiste) die Lehre bereichern; nur wer gelernt hat kann das: darum ist es unmöglich für die Kommenden anders als Lernend zu leben. Die Nachkommen sind aus dem Geist Gottes (Menschen), sie steigen aus der

Bewegung des Geistes wie Wellen auf. Unterricht ist der eine einzige Punkt der freien Vereinigung der ältern mit der jüngern Generation, wie Wellen die im Ineinandergehen den Schaumkamm werfen.

Jeder Irrtum in der Erziehung geht darauf zurück daß man in irgend einem letzten Sinne unsere nachkommen von *uns* abhängig denkt. Sie sind von uns nicht anders abhängig als von Gott und der Sprache in die wir uns daher um irgend einer Gemeinsamkeit mit unsern Kindern willen versenken müssen.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> 'I am convinced: tradition is the medium in which the student *continuously* changes into the teacher, and this within the entire scope of education. In tradition, all are educators and all have to be educated and everything is education. These relationships are symbolised and summarised in the development of the *Lehre*. Whoever has not learned cannot educate, as he does not see at which point he is lonely, where he encompasses tradition in his own way and, by teaching, makes it communicable. Whoever has understood his knowing as traditional [*überliefertes*, literally meaning 'handed down'], in him alone does it become *überlieferbar* [literally: 'able to be handed down'], he becomes free in a tremendous way. This is where I think the origin lies of the talmudic joke. The *Lehre* is like a surging sea, but for the wave (if we take it as an image of man) the point is to abandon itself to its movement in such a way, that it grows up to its crest and crashes down in a foam. This immense freedom of the crash is education, or actually: teaching, tradition becoming visible and *free*: it crashes because it is full of life. It is very hard to talk about education, as its order coincides with the religious order or tradition. To educate is only (in the mind) to enrich the *Lehre*; only he who has learned can do this: that is why it is impossible for coming generations to live in any other way than learning. Our descendants are (people) from the spirit of God, they rise like waves out of the movement of the spirit. Teaching is the only point of a free unity of the older with the younger generation, like waves which produce a crest of foam as they go over into one another. Every mistake in education boils down to the conviction that our descendants are somehow ultimately dependant on *us*. They are no more dependant on us than they are dependant on God and language, in which we therefore have to immerse ourselves in the name of a kind of community with our children.' (GB I, 382-383; Benjamin's emphasis. Scholem enthusiastically acknowledges receipt of this letter in a diary entry dated 19 September 1917: 'Höchst erfreuenden Brief von Walter Benjamin bekommen. Über Unterricht.' (Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, p. 37). This letter seems to have prompted both Scholem and Benjamin to think about the concept of tradition as a medium, and, as we will point out later, the former subsequently devoted himself to a *Quellenstudium* of his and Benjamin's intuitions, finding quotations from the Talmud to back up his arguments).



## III

This is one of the first times after writing *Über Sprache* that Benjamin again uses the term *Medium*, this time referring to tradition or the unfolding of the *Lehre*. He defined the concept of *Medium* before in the context of language as the medium of its own communication: language, so to speak, as a ‘Sich-Darstellendes’, which already elevates it to a privileged position.<sup>97</sup> He went on to qualify this existence of language as a medium, *das Mediale*, as both *unmittelbar* and *unendlich*, or immediate and infinite. Tradition, he now says,

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<sup>97</sup> After its initial appearance in *Über Sprache* and *Über das Programm*, *Medium* again becomes a central concept in Benjamin’s doctoral thesis *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (1919-1920), in which Benjamin names the early German Romantics as the first to establish the autonomy of the artwork (see *GB* I, 441), which thus becomes a ‘Sich-Darstellendes’, and in which he uses the concept of *Reflexionsmedium* to link art, criticism and knowledge as such: ‘Die Erkenntnis in dem Reflexionsmedium der Kunst ist die Aufgabe der Kunstkritik.’ (I, 65). The term *Medium – Reflexionsmedium, Denkmedium* – still refers to the sphere in which thought or art as such must necessarily exist, so its meaning has not shifted away massively from its original use in the abovementioned essays. Unfortunately, it does not lie within our scope to reread *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik* in the context of Benjamin’s earlier reflections on tradition, education and knowledge, but intuitively we can say that it is quite possible that Benjamin refracted these reflections through the early German Romantics and came up with a unified theory of their art criticism which was as much inspired by theology as it was by the Romantics’ own writings, or that these seemingly disparate conceptions actually did share the same deep structure. Or in the words of Scholem: ‘Benjamin unternahm es zu zeigen, wie ästhetische Ideen mit theologischen Kategorien aufs innigst zusammenhängen.’ (‘Walter Benjamin’, p. 210) One of Benjamin’s own subtle hints which may well point in this direction is the description of his thesis in a letter to Ernst Schoen as ‘ein Hinweis auf die durchaus in der Literatur unbekannte wahre Natur der Romantik [...]’ (*GB* II, 23). As Lieven De Cauter already pointed out, there seems to be a hidden agenda between and under the lines of *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik*, which is eminently summarised in its own description of Schlegel’s work: ‘Bei Schlegel tritt [...] das Gradnetz seiner Gedanken unter den überdeckenden Zeichnung fast nie hervor.’ (I, 44). See Lieven De Cauter, *De Dwerg in de Schaakautomaat*, p. 32 ff.).

is the medium of *Erziehung*, education, and it would therefore follow that the sphere of education is also *unmittelbar* and *unendlich*.<sup>98</sup> The way Benjamin describes the individual's relationship towards tradition supports this notion. Firstly, as we said before, because the *Lehre* is the sphere in which truth exists, there can be no intentionality in the quest for the true knowledge of tradition, from the perspective of the subject as well as the object. As we mentioned before, the student of tradition must approach his object with a humble and open mind, empty and ready to accept the revealed truth of tradition. He must not, as many Jewish stories of *hybris* in the face of the divine make clear, confront tradition with an aggressive, predatory intention, eager for knowledge that may be of some benefit to him, because the true treasure of tradition will retreat from him, and more often than not, he will be punished, for it lies in the nature of truth, 'vor welcher auch das reinste Feuer des Suchens wie unter Wassern verlischt'.<sup>99</sup> In other words, truth in the *Lehre* becomes *immediately*,

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<sup>98</sup> Six months after receiving Benjamin's letter, Scholem records the following note in his diary, in which he interprets a passage from B. *Pesahim* in the context of the medial nature of the *Lehre*: 'In der Thora gibt es kein Vorher und Nachher, ומאחר ומאחר d.h. der Talmud kennt die *mediale* Natur der Lehre.' He also mentions writing a letter to Benjamin in which he expresses his amazement at how much he as well as his friend had learned about the Jewish tradition over the past years: 'An Walter: Ich denke jetzt manchmal mit Staunen daran, was ich in den sechs Jahren getan habe, in denen die vergangene Epoche Ihres Lebens [sich] beschlossen findet. Ich habe gelernt, wobei freilich dieses Wort nicht in der deutschen, sondern in den unübersetzbaren tiefen Bedeutung zu nehmen ist, die es im Hebräischen und Jiddischen hat, wo lernen schlechthin immer nur die Lehre betrifft. Es ist ein reines Wunder, daß Walter nun auch da ist.' (*Tagebücher*, vol. 2, p. 151). As the second volume of Scholem's diaries was only published in November 2000, their documentary importance to the interpretation of Benjamin's work remains to be investigated.

<sup>99</sup> (I, 216). A good example of *hybris* punished in spite of the piety of the subject in question is the story of Moses and the water from the rock: it is the impatience of the great man which leads him to tap the rock a second time, and which elicits the rather

*unmittelbar*, available insofar as it is *not* seen as a means to an end, *un-mittelbar*. But the immediacy, *Unmittelbarkeit*, also refers to the fact that truth within tradition assumes the form of revelation, which, by definition, cannot be mediated. The light of revelation must shine *through* the prophet, as it does in the case of Moses, so the word of God may reach the faithful in an unadulterated form, or, better still, the prophet must *be* the word of God, as in the case of Jesus, the Λόγος incarnated. The term *Erleuchtung*, illumination, which Benjamin uses with reference to both religious and profane experiences, illustrates the fact that he conceives of this experience as immediate or unmediated. This is why, in the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin feels himself drawn to the receptive immediacy of the dream, which is one of the ways in which the theological concept of *Erleuchtung* has its profane counterpart. As he writes in a note on the figure of the collector:

Im Grunde lebt der Sammler, so darf man sagen, ein Stück Traumleben. Denn auch im Traum ist der Rhythmus des Wahrnehmens und Erlebens derart verändert, daß alles – auch das scheinbar Neutralste – uns zustößt, uns betrifft. Um die Passagen aus dem Grunde zu verstehen, versenken wir uns in die tiefste Traumschicht, reden von ihnen so als wären sie uns zugestoßen.<sup>100</sup>

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cruel punishment that he will not be allowed to see the promised land for himself (*Num.* 20: 9-13).

<sup>100</sup> 'In the dream, too, the rhythm of perception and experience has been changed to such an extent that everything – even the apparently most neutral things – befalls us, strikes us. In order to understand the arcades in the most fundamental way, we immerse ourselves into the deepest layers of the dream, and speak of them as if they had befallen us.' [H 1a, 5] (V, 272). Benjamin's attempt to use this immediacy

However, this immediacy can take a rather less mystical form than its name may suggest. The parable of the old man and his three sons is a good example of this, as its 'lesson' is revealed to the three sons in a flash of insight, a very ironic *Aha-Erlebnis* so to speak, finding truth when they were actually looking for something entirely different. Significantly, however, they were in the ritual 'Kreis des Handwerks', performing manual labour which, as we discussed in the previous chapter, is the sphere of distracted learning, allowing experiences to sink into their consciousness and take root. As Benjamin's metaphor of the sea and the waves makes clear, the individual must abandon himself to the movement of the infinite sea of tradition – and this movement is the *Gedankenbewegung* which we called study – and only then does tradition become wholly visible and wholly free. This is the second characteristic of

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strategically elicited the following famous criticism from Adorno on *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire*: '[...] das theologische Motiv, die Dinge beim Namen zu nennen, schlägt tendenziell um in die staunende Darstellung der bloßen Faktizität.' Even though he was not convinced, as Benjamin was, that this strategy could possibly be effective, Adorno did interpret its essence quite correctly, as he writes in the same letter: 'Täusche ich mich nicht, so gebricht es dieser Dialektik am einem: der Vermittlung.' (Letter from Adorno to Benjamin, 10 November 1938, in *Theodor W. Adorno – Walter Benjamin: Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, edited by Henri Lonitz, second edition (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), p. 368 and 366 respectively). Benjamin's reply is polite but firm. He refuses to compromise the 'esoteric' doctrine informing his work, and suggests that this particular 'productive interest' has been with him too long to give up now: 'Wenn ich mich [in San Remo] weigerte, im Namen eigener produktiver Interessen mir eine esoterische Gedankenentwicklung zu eigen zu machen und insoweit über die Interessen des dialektischen Materialismus und des Instituts hinweg zur Tagesordnung überzugehen, so war da zuletzt nicht allein Solidarität mit dem Institut noch bloße Treue zum dialektischen Materialismus im Spiel, sondern Solidarität mit den Erfahrungen, die wir alle in den letzten fünfzehn Jahren gemacht haben. Es handelt sich also um eigenste produktive Interessen von mir auch hier; ich will nicht leugnen, da sie den ursprünglichen gelegentlich Gewalt anzutun versuchen können. Es liegt ein Antagonismus vor, dem enthoben zu sein ich

tradition as a medium: its infinity. Strictly speaking, it is impossible for a finite being to encompass an infinite entity, yet this is exactly what happens in Benjamin's description of tradition. This, with a characteristically Benjaminian *and* characteristically Jewish turn of thought, is essentially a paradox, a juxtaposition of opposites which is not resolved in a dialectical *Aufhebung*, but kept in suspension. This suspension can be construed as the conceptual or philosophical equivalent of a leap of faith. In *Über das Programm*, whose self-confessed aim is to elaborate and extend the Kantian concept of experience so that it will be able to accommodate and explain religious experience,<sup>101</sup> Benjamin attempts to systematise the juxtaposition and suspension of opposites in the concept of non-synthesis, which is to be added to the Kantian paradigm: 'Jedoch wird außer dem Begriff der Synthesis auch der einer gewissen Nicht-Synthesis zweier Begriffe in einem andern systematisch höchst wichtig werden, da außer der Synthesis noch eine andere Relation zwischen Thesis und Antithesis möglich ist.'<sup>102</sup>

The clue to the paradoxical confrontation of a finite human experience with an infinite tradition lies in Benjamin's statement that he who has understood his knowledge as *überliefert* becomes 'auf unerhörter Weise frei'. This must

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nicht einmal im Traum wünschen könnte.' (GB VI, 184; Adorno – Benjamin: *Briefwechsel*, p. 379).

<sup>101</sup> 'So läßt sich also die Aufgabe der kommenden Philosophie fassen als die Auffindung oder Schaffung desjenigen Erkenntnisbegriffes der, indem er zugleich auch den Erfahrungsbegriff *ausschließlich* auf das transzendente Bewußtsein bezieht, nicht allein mechanische sondern auch religiöse Erfahrung logisch ermöglicht.' (II, 164).

<sup>102</sup> 'Apart from the concept of synthesis, however, the concept of a certain non-synthesis of two concepts in another will also become of the highest systematic importance, as another relationship between thesis and antithesis is possible apart from synthesis.' (II, 166).

seem like quite a counterintuitive qualification, for how can anybody who is carrying the whole weight of the Jewish tradition, with every single one of its legal complexities, be ‘tremendously free’? The opposite rather seems to be true, the individual appears to be bound hand and foot by an unsurveyable quantity of legal and religious requirements. This anxiety is expressed in the words of Micha Joseph Berdyczewski, which we quoted in the first chapter: ‘Our eyes are not our own, our dreams and our thoughts are not our own, our will is not the one implanted in us; everything we were taught long ago, everything has been handed down to us.’<sup>103</sup> Yet the freedom of which Benjamin speaks is intimately linked to the infinity of tradition becoming *sichtbar*, visible. There is a way in which the finite individual can encompass an infinite tradition, namely by becoming part of it, by entering into the sphere of the *Lehre*, the individual ‘umfaßt die Tradition auf seine Weise’ and makes it ‘lehrend mitteilbar’. It is the initial humility in the face of the Law or the *Lehre* which makes a free lightheartedness possible. As Benjamin said in the letter quoted above: ‘Hier denke ich mich den metaphysischen Ursprung des talmudischen Witzes.’<sup>104</sup> The talmudic joke indeed has its origin in the unmediated confrontation of the sacred and the profane, of a finite humanity and an infinite divinity, which can make the former seem momentarily divine

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<sup>103</sup> See chapter one, note 54.

<sup>104</sup> *GB* I, 382; see note 96 above. As we mentioned before, Benjamin’s letter prompted Scholem too to think about the talmudic joke, and he paraphrases Benjamin’s words in his ‘Kleine Anmerkungen über Judentum’, written in Jena late 1917 and early 1918: ‘Walter definiert den talmudischen Witz als das Sich-Selbst-Überschlagen der Lehre.’ (*Tagebücher*, vol. 2, p. 206). The passage from *Baba Mezi’ah* quoted above describes exactly such a folding over of tradition onto itself, as it calls into question divine authority by affirming the profane. This subordination of the divine to the profane

and the latter seem almost human, exemplified by an ironically smiling God in the tractate *Baba Meziah* when the rabbis use his own law against him: 'He laughed and said "my children have overcome me!"' (59b).<sup>105</sup> This paradoxical, perhaps even heretical combination of the sacred and the profane that is the sometimes irreverent talmudic joke is the precursor of Benjamin's abovementioned concept of *profane Erleuchtung*, which is an inversion of its talmudic counterpart (the talmudic joke uses a profane concept to achieve sacred ends, *profane Erleuchtung* uses theological concepts to achieve profane ends). This is voiced very clearly in the *Haschisch-Protokolle*, where Benjamin describes his experiences under the influence of hashish in terms of a changed attitude towards time and space, and more particularly towards eternity, which is no longer perceived to be daunting: 'Nun kommen die Zeit- und Raumansprüche zur Geltung, die der Haschischesser macht. Die sind ja bekanntlich absolut königlich. Versailles ist dem, der Haschisch gegessen hat, nicht zu groß, und die Ewigkeit dauert ihm nicht zu lange.'<sup>106</sup> The initial, perhaps instinctive humility of 'der winzige, gebrechliche Menschenkörper'<sup>107</sup>

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constitutes the messianic paradox, which lies at the very heart of Benjamin's concept of *profane Erleuchtung*.

<sup>105</sup> See chapter one, note 72.

<sup>106</sup> 'Now the claims on time and space, which the hashish-eater makes, make themselves felt. They are, as is well known, absolutely regal. Versailles is not too big for him who has eaten hashish, and eternity does not last too long.' (IV, 410; see also VI, 564, 565 and 581). In one of the notes for the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin describes a similar authoritative lightheartedness with reference to space and history: 'Ein nur Wachsfiguren bewohnbarer Aufbau. Damit fange ich plastisch so viel an; der ganze Piscator kann einpacken. Habe die Möglichkeit, mit winzigen Hebelchen die ganze Beleuchtung umzustellen. Kann aus dem Goethehaus die londoner Oper machen. Kann die ganze Weltgeschichte daraus ablesen. Mir erscheint im Raum, weshalb ich die Kolportagebilder sammle. Kann alles im Zimmer sehen; die Söhne Karls III. und was sie wollen.' [I 2a, 1] (V, 286).

<sup>107</sup> 'the tiny, frail human body' (II, 439).

in the face of an unforgiving eternity has turned into a knowing lightheartedness which 'auf seine Weise die Tradition umfaßt und lehrend mitteilbar macht.' The fact that Benjamin did indeed see these profane effects of intoxication from a theological perspective becomes abundantly clear in the 1929 essay *Der Surrealismus*, where he writes:

Die wahre, schöpferische Überwindung religiöser Erleuchtung aber liegt nun wahrhaftig nicht bei den Rauschgiften. Sie liegt in einer *profanen Erleuchtung*, einer materialistischen, anthropologischen Inspiration, zu der Haschisch, Opium und was immer sonst die Vorschule abgeben können. (Aber eine gefährliche. Und die der Religionen ist strenger.)<sup>108</sup>

It is clear that Benjamin saw a great structural affinity between religious education, study or *Erziehung*, and the state of experience under the influence of intoxicating substances. A careful analysis of these structural affinities in fact reveals, something which Benjamin had hitherto confined to 'dunkeln Bildern und geheimnisvollen Winken', how he conceives both of the sphere of tradition and the state of intoxication. The long passage from the letter which we quoted above contains another pointer in this direction. Benjamin says that in order for the older generation to educate itself as it is educating its children, it must immerse itself in God and language, i.e. revelation and tradition: '[zu] Gott und der Sprache in die wir uns daher um irgend einer Gemeinsamkeit mit

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<sup>108</sup> 'The true, creative overcoming of religious illumination is not in fact to be found in intoxicating substances. It lies with a *profane illumination*, a materialist,



unsern Kindern willen versenken müssen'. The crucial term here is *Versenkung*, which we have mentioned several times in passing. It continues an almost fluid metaphor of immersion, submersion or sinking, a very synaesthetic form of perception which brings together both subject and object in a single, all-encompassing sphere. Nor is this metaphor limited to only one 'stage' in Benjamin's intellectual development, whether this should be the so-called 'theological' *Frühschriften* or the allegedly marxist-materialist *Spätwerk*. On the contrary, if we survey the whole of Benjamin's work, we find that this metaphor keeps recurring in different guises and permutations, yet it always remains manifestly and probably intentionally recognisable: if Benjamin does indeed have his own esoteric doctrine, this may well be it.

In *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, for example, the seminal description of truth as 'ein aus Ideen gebildetes intentionsloses Sein' is followed by the admonition: 'Das ihr gemäße Verhalten ist demnach nicht ein Meinen im Erkennen, sondern ein in sie Eingehen und Verschwinden.'<sup>109</sup> This 'Eingehen und Verschwinden' is a more abstract version of the immersion metaphor, but it is nevertheless eminently recognisable as such. In this epistemology, the subject does not remain a discreet entity, but voluntarily immerses himself within truth, and appears even to become part of its sphere. A more literal and more fluid example can be found in the letter to Scholem

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anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, and what not can only be a propaedeutic. (But a dangerous one. And that of religions is stricter.)' (II, 297).

<sup>109</sup> 'The appropriate attitude to it is therefore not a meaning [in the double sense of 'significance' and 'meaning to say] in knowing [or recognising] but entering into it and disappearing.' (I, 216).

quoted above, where Benjamin refers to the ‘wogendes Meer’ of tradition to which man, represented as an individual wave, is to abandon himself:

[...] für die Welle aber (wenn wir sie als Bild des Menschen nehmen) kommt alles darauf an sich seiner Bewegung so hinzugeben, daß sie bis zum Kamm wächst und herüberstürzt mit Schäumen. Diese ungeheure Freiheit des Übersturzes ist die Erziehung, im eigentlichen: Der Unterricht, das Sichtbar- und *frei* werden der Tradition: ihr Überstürzen aus lebendiger Fülle.<sup>110</sup>

Again, we see the same recurring characteristics of this privileged form of experience or knowledge: one awe-inspiring, viscous whole, and the disappearance of the subject within it as the consummation of his initiation, if we may be allowed the use of this rather ambiguous term. This passage is particularly thought-provoking, because here Benjamin links the ‘aqueous’ form of experience very explicitly to the Jewish tradition. It constitutes one of his first revelations of the doctrine of *profane Erleuchtung*, which is yet to become entirely profane, at least on the surface level. This strategic profanisation, performed mainly because of the *Unzeitgemäßheit* of explicitly theological language to the modern mind – of which Benjamin was keenly aware – takes place predominantly in the *Haschisch-Protokolle* and in the long gestation process that resulted in the vast compendium of quotes we now know as the *Passagen-Werk*. In his writings on intoxication, the metaphors of water,

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<sup>110</sup> GB I, 382; see note 96 above.

sea and waves are quite prominent. As Egon Wissing, one of the doctors attending to Benjamin during his experiments, wrote in his notes: 'Das Wasser beherrscht die Bildwelt weiter, die Vorstellung des Meeres, die bei den Wellen zu Grunde lag, tritt aber nunmehr gegen die von Strömen zurück.'<sup>111</sup> In the same *Versuchsprotokoll*, he recorded one apodictic statement which reveals the full extent of the connection which existed in Benjamin's mind between religious and intoxicated experience, a statement which again unites the Jewish concept of tradition, as a labour of remembrance, with a very physical concept of immersion as the essence of the experience of intoxication: 'Erinnerung ist ein Bad.'<sup>112</sup> This short *Lehrsatz*, written about ten years after *Über Sprache* and *Über das Programm*, shows a remarkable continuity in Benjamin's thought and at the same time summarises the basic intention of the project which would occupy most of his time until his death in 1940, the *Passagen-Werk*.

The unpublished *Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen*, which can be found in volume six of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, have always been read, if at all, as a quaint anomaly, a mystifying dead end in Benjamin's *oeuvre*, unconnected to any of his main works and altogether unworthy of scholarly attention.<sup>113</sup> As

<sup>111</sup> 'Water continues to dominate the imagery, the image of the sea, which lay at the basis of the waves [which Benjamin had used earlier in an *excursus* about heraldic emblems], now recedes in favour of the image of streams.' (VI, 594).

<sup>112</sup> 'Memory is a bath.' (VI, 596). Wissing recorded two other thought-provoking statements in the same *Protokoll* in which the fluid, aqueous metaphor is used, this time to elucidate the notions of images and writing: 'Bilder wollen nur ihren Fluß, denen ist alles gleich', and 'Ich möchte schreiben etwas, das so aus Sachen kommt wie der Wein aus Trauben.' (VI, 596). The last image is particularly interesting in the context of the physical conception of the sign in the Jewish tradition, which we discussed in the first chapter, and its full implications remain to be studied.

<sup>113</sup> One notable exception is Hermann Schweppenhäuser's essay 'Die Vorschule der profanen Erleuchtung' (in Hermann Schweppenhäuser, *Ein Physiognom der Dinge: Aspekte des Benjaminschen Denkens* (Lüneburg: Dietrich zu Klampen, 1992), pp.

was the case with Molitor, this unwillingness yet again bears witness to an inexcusable academic myopia, not only because certain fragments from the *Protokolle* found their way into the notes for the *Passagen-Werk*,<sup>114</sup> but also because Benjamin himself explicitly states that these *Protokolle* have the 'engste Beziehung' to his philosophical writings, as he says in a letter to Scholem dated 30 January 1928:

[...] ich [bin] nun schon zweimal in die Bezirke des Haschisch eingegangen [...]. Die Aufzeichnungen, die ich teils selbständig, teils im Anschluß an die Versuchsprotokolle darüber gemacht habe, dürften einen sehr lesenswerten Anhang zu meinen philosophischen Notizen geben, mit denen sie, und z.T. sogar die Erfahrungen im Rausch, die engsten Beziehungen haben. Diese Nachricht aber möchte ich im Schoß der Familie Scholem beschlossen wissen.<sup>115</sup>

104-123). However, this essay bears the mark of the editor of Benjamin's collected writings – and it is as such that he deserves praise – in that it is more an extended series of quotes than a serious attempt to shed light on the essence of the *Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen*, somewhat like a bad case of a *staunende Darstellung des bloßen Textes*. A similar critique can be levelled against Tillman Rexroth's editor's note to the first publication of some of the *Protokolle*, but at least Rexroth's intention was not to elucidate, but merely to introduce (quoted in VI, 819-821).

<sup>114</sup> See for instance *Konvolut I: das Interieur, die Spur*, notes I 2, 6 and I 2a, 1 (V, 286), which incorporate material from the second *Haschischversuch*; see also L°, 13 and M°, 6 from the early notes (V, 1020 and V, 1023 respectively).

<sup>115</sup> '[...] I have already entered into the realms of hashish twice now [...]. The notes, which I have made about that, partly independently, partly in connection to the experimental protocols, could be an appendix to my philosophical notes which is well worth reading, and with which they have the most intimate links, even, to a certain extent, the experiences under intoxication. However, I would like this piece of information to be kept within the Scholem family.' (GB III, 324).

Ten years after *Über Sprache*, Benjamin again places an esoteric text at, or at least very near, the centre of his thoughts, admonishing Scholem not to tell anyone of the existence of the *Protokolle*. In the same letter, he mentions another text which never saw the light of day, ‘den äußerst prekären Versuch “Pariser Passagen. Eine dialektische Feerie”’, which he is hoping to finish within the next few weeks, and about which Benjamin is reluctant to reveal anything as yet: ‘Verraten kann ich dich im übrigen von dieser Sache noch nichts, habe noch nicht einmal genaue Vorstellungen vom Umfang.’<sup>116</sup> This time, however, Benjamin’s secretiveness has surpassed itself: more than four years later, the *Haschisch-Protokolle* are still subject to a *Schweigegebot*. In a letter to Scholem of 26 July 1932, in which he writes about his four ‘major

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<sup>116</sup> ‘[...] the extremely precarious essay “Parisian Arcades: a dialectical fairytale” [...]. I cannot give away anything about this matter yet, I do not even have a clear idea about its size.’ (GB III, 322-323). Towards the end of 1927, Benjamin starts announcing the incipient *Passagenwerk* in his correspondence, tentatively and teasingly. At this point, he still seems extremely reluctant to give anything away about its substance before the work is finished, yet at the same time, he already fears, thirteen years before its final failure, that he will not be able to finish the work (this time because he was still planning to go to Jerusalem and teach at the new Hebrew University). As he writes to Alfred Cohn on 16 October 1927: ‘Im übrigen aber bin ich mit Angst und Bangen an eine neue Arbeit verloren, die sich mit Paris beschäftigt. Und weil ich meine documentation vor der Abfahrt zusammenbringen will, verwende ich jede verfügbare Stunde an die Bibliothèque Nationale. Bin ich einmal hier fort, so ist die Literatur, die ich brauche für mich nicht mehr zugänglich.’ (GB III, 292-293). This early sense of urgency where the *Passagen-Werk* is concerned never leaves Benjamin, and it is his unwillingness to leave his sources in the Bibliothèque Nationale behind which ultimately endangers his attempt to escape the European war zone beyond redemption. As he wrote twelve years before his death, and the very same letter to Scholem: ‘[...] nie habe ich mit solchem Risiko des Mißlingens geschrieben [...]’ (GB III, 322). This sense of urgency later becomes part of Benjamin’s philosophy of history, as he writes in thesis V of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*: “Die Wahrheit wird uns nicht davonlaufen” – dieses Wort, das von Gottfried Keller stammt, bezeichnet im Geschichtsbild des Historismus genau die Stelle, an der es vom historischen Materialismus durchschlagen wird. Denn es ist ein unwiederbringliches Bild der Vergangenheit, das mit jeder Gegenwart zu

unfinished works', Benjamin again mentions his experiments with intoxication, again names them as one of the focal points of his thought, and again swears Scholem to silence: 'Es sind die "Pariser Passagen", die "Gesammelten Essays zur Literatur", die "Briefe" und ein höchst bedeutsames Buch über das Haschisch. Von diesem letztern Thema weiß niemand und es soll vorläufig unter uns bleiben.'<sup>117</sup>

In the context of Benjamin's preoccupation with the epistemological notion of tradition as an almost physical form of immersion, it is hardly surprising that he felt himself drawn to the concept of intoxication. In the drug-induced *Rausch*, he found the empirical counterpart, so to speak, to his intuitive philosophical speculations. Here, he could experiment with the notion of *Versunkenheit* first hand, and especially the first few *Haschischversuche* frequently talk about different forms of immersion, physical and otherwise, as well as of the consequences of finding oneself 'tiefer drinnen'.<sup>118</sup> One of his more remarkable impressions, which would become a crucial part of Benjamin's perspective on the Parisian arcades, finding itself reiterated in different guises throughout the notes, is the aversion the subject begins to

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verschwinden droht, die sich nicht als in ihm gemeint erkannte.' (I, 695; see also V, 579 [N 3a, 1]).

<sup>117</sup> 'They are the "Parisian Arcades", the "Collected Essays on Literature", the "Letters" and a highly significant book about hashish. Nobody knows about this last theme and it should remain between us for the time being.' (GB IV, 113). The editors appear to be in agreement on the importance of the hashish-project to Benjamin's thought as a theoretical rather than an impressionistic study, stating that 'Das *Buch über Haschisch* war demnach eher als philosophische und erkenntniskritische Studie geplant denn als Sammlung aparter Wahrnehmungen im Rauschzustand.' (GB IV, 114-115).

<sup>118</sup> Cfr. the first note of the second *Haschisch-Impression*: 'Die Erinnerung ist weniger reich, trotzdem die Versunkenheit eine geringere als beim vorigen Mal war. Ich war, genau gesagt, weniger versunken, aber tiefer drinnen.' (VI, 560).

cultivate for the very thought of the 'outside': 'Vielleicht ist es keine Selbsttäuschung zu sagen, daß man in diesem Zustand eine Abneigung gegen den freien sozusagen uranischen Luftraum bekommt, der den Gedanken des "Draußen" beinah zur Qual werden läßt.'<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, like the viscous sphere of tradition before it, this *Versunkenheit* into the sphere of intoxication is given a privileged epistemological status, as unexpected connections and correspondences reveal themselves within this sphere. These correspondences, however, are sometimes ghostly and macabre, and the sphere of intoxication as well as the atmosphere of the arcades with which it becomes associated, is something of a *tremendum fascinans* to Benjamin, exuding an almost literally haunting influence over the last years of his work. The passage quoted above continues:

Es ist nicht mehr, wie voriges Mal das freundliche gesellige Verweilen im Raum aus Freude an der Situation wie sie ist sondern ein dichtes sich eingewebt sich eingesponnen haben, ein Spinnennetz in dem das Weltgeschehen verstreut wie ausgesogene Insektenleiber herumhängt. Von dieser Höhle will man sich nicht trennen. Hier bilden sich auch

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<sup>119</sup> 'Perhaps it is no delusion to say that one cultivates an aversion against the free, so to speak, uranic air(space), which almost turns the thought of the "outside" into a torment.' (VI, 561). *Konvolut I* contains an edited transcription of this passage: 'Übrigens schließt diese Stimmung eine Abneigung gegen den freien, sozusagen uranischen Luftraum ein, der auf die ausschweifende Tapezierkunst der damaligen Innenräume ein neues Licht wirft.' [I, 2, 6] (V, 286). This passage shows a remarkable similarity to Wittgenstein's statement in his *Philosophische Untersuchungen*: 'Es gibt gar kein Draußen; draußen fehlt die Lebensluft' (§ 103). Both statements share the lapidary nature of the doctrinal *Lehrsatz*, Wittgenstein's even more so than Benjamin's, and both state the semantic and epistemic superiority of the sphere of the 'inside' over the 'outside'. See chapter two, note 88.

Rudimente eines unfreundlichen Verhaltens gegen die Anwesenden, Angst, daß sie einen zerstören, herauszerren könnten.<sup>120</sup>

In November 1938, when the *Passagen-Werk* had been occupying Benjamin's mind for more than ten years without its end being even remotely in sight, Adorno expressed his concern that it might never see the light of day and wrote, quoting the words of his wife: 'Gretel hat einmal im Scherz gesagt, daß sie die Höhlentiefe ihrer Passagen bewohnten, und darum vorm Abschluß der Arbeit zurückschreckten, weil sie fürchteten, den Bau dann verlassen zu müssen.'<sup>121</sup> A few months earlier, Gretel Adorno herself had written to Benjamin: 'Ich habe nur die Befürchtung, daß es Dir in den Passagen so gut

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<sup>120</sup> 'It is no longer, like the previous time, the friendly, cosy sojourn in space out of sheer joy in the situation as it is, but a dense form of having woven oneself in, having spun a cocoon around oneself, a spiderweb in which the whole of world history hangs scattered like insects' bodies which have been sucked dry. One does not want to leave this cave [*Höhle*]. This is also the point where the rudiments of an unfriendly behaviour towards those present are formed, a fear that they might destroy or drag one out.' (VI, 561). The metaphor of weaving is repeated once more in a later *Protokoll*, where Benjamin writes: 'Es bildet sich jetzt ein Gespinst. Alles verbindet sich mit schwarzem Hintergrund wie auf schlechten Stichen.' (VI, 596; see also VI, 567). The concept of the texture, *das Gewebe*, is particularly fascinating in the context of the Jewish tradition: as we mentioned before, the name for the subdivisions of the *Sedarim* in the Mishnah and Talmud is *Massekhuot*, or textures. It would be interesting to see in how far the metaphor of the texture in Benjamin's work can be linked to theological motifs. In the case of both the *Haschisch-Protokolle* as well as the *Passagen-Werk*, this link might well be found in the revelation of unexpected correspondences, but we have neither time nor space to elaborate this concept in depth.

<sup>121</sup> 'Gretel once said in jest that you lived in the cavernous depths of your arcades, and therefore shrink back from finishing your work because you fear that you will have to leave the building.' (Adorno – Benjamin: *Briefwechsel*, p. 370). In the same letter, Adorno adds the following sentences to his wife's observation, showing that he understood Benjamin's sensitivities about both the precarious and the esoteric nature of his project: 'Lassen Sie uns Sie dazu ermuntern uns doch Zugang zum Allerheiligsten zu verschaffen. Ich glaube, Sie brauchen weder um die Stabilität des Gehäuses besorgt zu sein noch dessen Profanierung zu fürchten.' (pp. 370-371).



gefällt, daß Du Dich von diesem Prachtbau gar nicht mehr trennen willst, [...]’.<sup>122</sup> What is particularly interesting about these letters is the fact that Gretel Adorno – and possibly her husband – actually knew of Benjamin’s experiments with hashish, and that they therefore might have been referring implicitly, but directly, to his *Haschisch-Protokolle*. It is certainly thought-provoking that a combination of both Gretel’s and Theodor’s sentences all but yields a carbon copy of Benjamin’s original sentence: ‘Von diese[r] Höhle[ntiefe] willst du dich [gar] nicht mehr trennen.’<sup>123</sup> But there is more to suggest that the mystifying *Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen* and the no less mysterious *Passagen-Werk* share a common logic, and that this logic in its turn has the same basic characteristics that Benjamin attributed to the concept of tradition. In the early notes for the *Passagen-Werk*, made at the same time as the early *Protokolle*, the immersion metaphor we mentioned before recurs several times. In one of these notes, it is extremely explicit and quite revealing, as Benjamin writes: ‘Motiv der Traumzeit: Atmosphäre der Aquarien. Wasser

<sup>122</sup> ‘I only fear that you like it so much in the arcades that you no longer want to tear yourself away from this wonderful building [...]’ (*Adorno – Benjamin: Briefwechsel*, p. 315).

<sup>123</sup> See Benjamin’s letters to Gretel Adorno of 25 May 1933 and June 1934 (*GB IV*, 216–218 and 440–442 respectively). The first letter is particularly interesting, as Benjamin gives an encrypted, but nevertheless quite elaborate and revealing description of one of his experiments with opium, but does so in a way that suggests Gretel was already familiar with this practice. The language Benjamin uses, however, is instantly recognisable to anyone who has read any of the *Protokolle*. Describing the consolation provided by the drug, Benjamin writes: ‘Woher er kommt, ist eigentlich nicht allzu schwer erratbar, wenn Sie sich nur in die Schilderung des Raums versenken, den ich vor Ihnen entstehen lassen werde und dabei einige Listen nicht vergessen, zu denen ich vor Jahren schon bisweilen meine Zuflucht genommen habe, ja, sie gemeinsam mit Ihnen zu nehmen versprochen habe und deren Künste ich Ihnen, wenn ich nicht sehr irre, im Gespräch schon einmal angedeutet habe.’ (*GB IV*, 217). The use of the (code)word *versenken* reveals the topic of this letter beyond doubt, and

Widerstand verlangsamend?’<sup>124</sup> Another note reads: ‘Erdatmosphäre als unterseeisch.’<sup>125</sup> Benjamin saw the antiquated Parisian arcades as the allegory of the nineteenth century: in the ruins of the arcades, all the dreams, expectations and aspirations of the collective unconscious still lingered, and the historian had to immerse himself, as well as his object, into this dream atmosphere to bring out the truth about both the recent past and the present: ‘Um die Passagen aus dem Grunde zu verstehen, versenken wir sie in die tiefste Traumschicht [...].’<sup>126</sup>

Benjamin’s ‘Motiv der Traumzeit’ is an ambiguous one. On the positive side, it refers to the abovementioned utopian expectations of every era, on the negative side, the motif of the dream refers to the numbness of the collective in capitalism, a state of anaesthesia brought about and symbolised by the magical spectacle of the commodity, the *Phantasmagorie der Ware*. In this particular collective dream, the capitalist system manages to present itself as a natural

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the fact that Benjamin had already spoken to Gretel about it could mean that she was aware of Benjamin’s incipient theory of intoxication.

<sup>124</sup> ‘Motif of the dream time: atmosphere of aquaria. Water resistance decelerating?’ [O°, 46] (V, 1031). In another note, Benjamin develops the metaphor in an elaborate description of the *Passage des Panoramas*: ‘Es war im allerersten Augenblick, als beträte man ein Aquarium. An der Wand des großen verdunkelten Saales zog es von schmalen Gelenken durchbrochen wie ein Land hinter Glas erleuchteten Wassers entlang. Das Farbenspiel der Tiefseefauna kann nicht brennender sein. [...]’ [c°, 4] (V, 1051). This note is included in the collection entitled *Pariser Passagen II*, written in 1928 and 1929, i.e. around the same time that Benjamin made the following note for one of his *Protokolle*, describing perception under the influence of hashish: ‘Das ist doch ganz klar, es ist die Welt durch Glas gesehen.’ (VI, 567 and 569).

<sup>125</sup> ‘Earth atmosphere as submarine.’ [H°, 4] (V, 1013). See also the reference to Maurice Renard’s novel *Le Péril Bleu*, which describes people on earth from the perspective of ‘Bewohner eines fremden Sterns’ as ‘Geschöpfe vom Grunde eines Meeresbodens’ [A°, 9] (V, 994).

<sup>126</sup> ‘In order to understand the arcades profoundly, we immerse them into the deepest layer of the dream [...]’ [F°, 34] (V, 1009; see also the amended version of this note in *Konvolut H: Der Sammler* [H 1a, 5]; V, 272, which we quoted above).

phenomenon rather than an artificial construction, lulling the people into an inert and unquestioning sense of acceptance, *ennui* or *Langeweile*.<sup>127</sup> One of Benjamin's intentions with the *Passagen-Werk* is to attempt to wake the collective from its dream, exposing it to the reality of its condition. Exactly how this awakening was meant to be brought about remains a mystery, and it is quite possible that Benjamin himself, by the time of his death, did not yet have a clear idea of how to bring together the very disparate elements needed for such a conceptual *tour de force*.<sup>128</sup> What is clear, however, is that Benjamin was obviously convinced that the *Traumdeutung* of the *Passagen-Werk* would tap into the power of remembrance that lay concealed within tradition, turning it into a profane force that could be used for utopian ends:

Das Erwachen als ein stufenweiser Prozeß, der im Leben des Einzelnen wie der Generation sich durchsetzt. Schlaf deren Primärstadium. Die Jugenderfahrung einer Generation hat viel gemein mit der Traumerfahrung. Ihre geschichtliche Gestalt ist Traumgestalt. Jede

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<sup>127</sup> Benjamin quotes a letter from Engels to Mehring to this effect: 'Es ist dieser Schein einer selbständigen Geschichte der Staatsverfassungen, der Rechtssysteme, der ideologischen Vorstellungen auf jedem Sondergebiete, der die meisten Leute vor allem blendet. [...] seitdem die bürgerliche Illusion von der Ewigkeit und Letztinstanzlichkeit der kapitalistischen Produktion dazugekommen ist, gilt ja sogar die Überwindung der Merkantilisten durch die Physiokraten und Adam Smith als ein bloßer Sieg des Gedankens, nicht als der Gedankenreflex veränderter ökonomischer Tatsachen, sondern als die endlich errungene Einsicht in stets und überall bestehende tatsächliche Bedingungen.' [N 6a, 1] (V, 585-586).

<sup>128</sup> It seems that Benjamin was fully aware of the difficulties his project would face from the onset. In one of the earliest notes, he writes: 'Architektur als wichtigstes Zeugnis der latenten "Mythologie". Und die wichtigste Architektur des 19<sup>ten</sup> Jahrhunderts ist die Passage. – Versuch, aus einem Traum zu erwachen als bestes Beispiel des dialektischen Umschlagens. Schwierigkeit dieser dialektischen Technik.' [D°, 7] (V, 1002).

Epoche hat diese Träumen zugewandte Seite, die Kinderseite. Für das vorige Jahrhundert sind es die Passagen. Während aber die Erziehung voriger Generationen in der Tradition, der religiösen Unterweisung, ihnen diese Träume gedeutet hat, läuft heutige Erziehung einfach auf die 'Zerstreuung' der Kinder hinaus. Was hier im folgenden gegeben wird, ist ein Versuch zur Technik des Erwachens. Die dialektische, die kopernikanische Wendung des Eingedenkens (Bloch).<sup>129</sup>

This 'kopernikanische Wendung des Eingedenkens', a profanisation of the Jewish concept of remembrance, is the form of profane illumination proposed in the *Passagen-Werk*: the moment of awakening as the shock of recognition fused with alienation. It is partly this sudden flash of insight, provoked by a careful, strategic circumnarration of the object – the nineteenth century as epitomised in the Parisian arcades – which is the particularly theological component of this strategy. True to its theological form, the truth about this recent past cannot be stated, it must be revealed. As Benjamin so famously wrote in *Konvolut N*: 'Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen.'<sup>130</sup> This perspective on the nature of historical truth is a direct descendant of Benjamin's *Lehre* about the nature of philosophical truth, or truth as such,

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<sup>129</sup> 'Awakening as a gradual process, which happens in the life of the individual as well as a generation. Sleep as its primary stage. The youth experience of a generation has a great deal in common with the dream experience. Its historical form is dream form. Every era has this side which is orientated towards dreams, its childhood side. For the previous century, they were the arcades. Whereas the education of previous generations in tradition, in religious education, has interpreted these dreams for them, education nowadays amounts to the "distraction" of children. What we will present in the following is an experiment in the technique of awakening. The dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance (Bloch).' [F°, 7] (V, 1006; see also [h°, 4] V, 1058).

which we discussed in this chapter. Not only is this epistemological perspective, as we have shown, a fundamentally theological one, it also continues to play a crucial and central role in Benjamin's thought up to the very end. In one of the notes for *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, probably composed no earlier than 1939, he writes:

Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit *huscht* vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Moment seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten. Seiner Flüchtigkeit dankt es, wenn es authentisch ist. In ihr besteht seine einzige Chance. Eben weil diese Wahrheit vergänglich ist und ein Hauch sie darinrafft, hängt viel an ihr.<sup>131</sup>

It is quite rare for Benjamin to write about the nature of truth in such explicit terms, which is possibly why the last three sentences did not make it into the 'final' version of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. As we have shown in this chapter, he tends to reveal his hidden doctrine, sometimes even to his closest friends, only once every ten years. In 1916-1918, he had done so in *Über Sprache* and *Über das Programm*, in 1925, the doctrine was restated in

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<sup>130</sup> 'I have nothing to say. Only to show.' [N 1a, 8] (V, 574).

<sup>131</sup> 'The true image of the past *flits* past. Only as an image which flashes up at the moment of its recognisability, only to disappear forever more, can the past be held. If it is authentic, it will be because it is fleeting. The image's only chance lies in its fleetingness. Exactly because this truth is perishable, and because a mere breath will cause it to collapse, so much depends on it.' (I, 1247). In the 'final' version of the *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, this passage was cut considerably: the entire explanation of why the image of the past is so fragile has been left out, possibly

*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, and in 1939, it finds its way, quite emphatically, into *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. What we have in between these dates and texts are usually the by now quite familiar ‘geheimnisvolle Winken’, which can be found throughout the massive collection of notes for the *Passagen-Werk*, like so many ‘schlechte Stichen’ which weave together its quotations.<sup>132</sup> But there is one more *locus classicus* of Benjamin’s epistemological *Lehre*, and one that has remained undiscovered for quite a long time. In the second *Haschisch-Impression*, from which we have already quoted several passages, Benjamin writes:

Was aber unser eigenes Abgleiten, Abspringen vom Gesprächsgegenstand angeht, so sieht das Gefühl, das der physischen Kontaktunterbrechung entspricht, etwa so aus: wovon wir gerade zu sprechen vorhaben, das lockt uns unendlich; was uns intentional vorschwebt, danach breiten wir liebend die Arme aus. Kaum habe wir es berührt, so enttäuscht es uns gänzlich: der Gegenstand unserer Aufmerksamkeit welkt unter der Berührung der Sprache plötzlich hin.<sup>133</sup>

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because, as a revelation itself, it was too explicit (see I, 695). So yet again we have an esoteric, *verschollener* text underlying Benjamin’s writings even at the very end.

<sup>132</sup> (VI, 596). See this chapter, note 120.

<sup>133</sup> ‘As far as our sliding or jumping away from the object of conversation is concerned, this feeling, which corresponds to the physical interruption of contact, looks somewhat like this: that which we intend to speak of entices us infinitely, we stretch our arms lovingly towards what we have in mind intentionally. But we have barely touched it when it disappoints us entirely: the object of our attention suddenly wilts away at the touch of language.’ (VI, 564).

This emphasises yet again Benjamin's by now well-documented aversion towards the direct statement, and his conviction that it is both philosophically and methodologically unfruitful. It also highlights the connection which continued to exist in Benjamin's thought between the concepts of revelation, tradition and intoxication, and their shared claim to speak in truth. Shunning away from the direct dogmatic statement, the *Passagen-Werk* intends to illuminate through the most eminently Jewish methods of tradition, the methods which in fact constitute tradition: quotation and commentary. *Konvolut N*, subtitled *Erkenntnis-theoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts*, leaves little doubt about the role of this traditional, theological method for the *Passagen-Werk*. Its form was to be a commentary on the nineteenth century, a transposition of the Talmudic methodology to reality: 'Sich immer wieder klarmachen, wie der Kommentar zu einer Wirklichkeit (denn es handelt sich um den Kommentar, Ausdeutung in den Einzelheiten) eine ganz andere Methode verlangt als der zu einem Text. In einem Fall ist Theologie, im andern Philologie die Grundwissenschaft.'<sup>134</sup> What this commentary on reality was meant to reveal exactly, as we said before, is not entirely clear, but at the end of this final chapter, we can propose a tentative hypothesis. A central, recurring theme in the *Protokolle zu Drogenversuchen* is the so-called *Kolportagephänomen*, a concept about which even the first word remains to be

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<sup>134</sup> 'To keep making clear to oneself how the commentary on a reality (since we are dealing with commentary, detailed interpretation) demands an entirely different method from the commentary on a text. In the one case it is theology, in the other it is philology which is the basic discipline.' [N 2, 1] (V, 574).

said.<sup>135</sup> At first sight, it is anything but obvious what cheap, trashy literature, sold door to door, might have in common with the Jewish tradition and profane illumination. Yet in the second *Protokoll*, Benjamin describes the phenomenon as follows:

Auf das Kolportagephänomen des Raumes zurückzukommen: es wird simultan die Möglichkeit aller potentiell in diesem Raume etwa geschehen Dinge wahrgenommen. Der Raum blinzelt einen an: Nun, was mag hier mir wohl zugetragen haben? Zusammenhang dieses Phänomens mit der Kolportage. Kolportage und Unterschrift. So vorzustellen: man denke sich einen kitschigen Öldruck an der Wand und im unteren Teile des Rahmens einen länglichen Streifen herausgeschnitten. Durch die untere Leiste lief ein Band und nun erschienen in dem Spalt Unterschriften die einander ablösten: 'Ermordung Egmonts', 'Kaiserkrönung Karls des Großen' etc. [...] Zusammenhang der Kolportage-Intention mit den tiefsten theologischen. Sie spiegeln sich getrübt wieder, versetzen in den Raum der Kontemplation, was nur im Raume des tätigen Lebens gilt. Nämlich: daß die Welt immer wieder dieselbe sei (daß alles Geschehen im gleichen Raume sich hätte abspielen können). Das ist im Theoretischen trotz allem eine müde, welke Wahrheit (trotz aller scharfen Sicht, die darin steckt)

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<sup>135</sup> Susan Buck-Morss's otherwise insightful book on the *Passagen-Werk*, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989), is conspicuously silent on this matter, and even Lieven De Cauter, whose book *De Dwerg in de Schaakautomaat* incorporates



aufs höchste aber bestätigt sie sich im Dasein des Frommen, dem wie hier der Raum der Phantasie zu allem *Gewesenen*, so alle Dinge zum *Besten* dienen. So tief ist Theologisches hier in den Bereich der Kolportage gesunken.<sup>136</sup>

The crux of this passage is the word *simultan*. All the events which potentially might have taken place in this space – the word *Raum* means more than just room – are perceived simultaneously. This form of simultaneity, which we discussed extensively in the first chapter, is one of the most fundamental characteristics of the Jewish tradition, with its insistent, almost stubborn tendency to keep a record of minority decisions, to accumulate interpretations and to immerse itself in the text, revealing correspondences between its seemingly most disparate aspects. As David Stern summarised it: ‘a

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two extremely revealing chapters about the *Passagen-Werk*, professed to be quite bemused by it (personal communication with the author).

<sup>136</sup> ‘Coming back to the pulp fiction phenomenon of the room: the possibility of all the things that could have happened in this room is perceived simultaneously. The room winks at you: now, what might have occurred to me here? Connection of this phenomenon with pulp fiction. Pulp fiction and caption. To be represented as follows: imagine a kitschy oil-painting on the wall and on the lower part of the frame a longish strip which has been cut out. Through the lower frame a ribbon would run, and through the gap, alternating captions would appear: “Murder of Egmont”, “Coronation of Emperor Charles the Great” etc. [...] Connection of the intention of pulp fiction with the deepest theological [intention]. They are a dull reflection of each other, transplanting the claims in the space of the active life into the space of contemplation. Namely, that the world is always the same again (that all events could have taken place in the same room [space]). In theory, in spite of everything, this is a tired, weak truth (in spite of all the sharp insight contained in it), yet it is confirmed most emphatically in the life of the pious, whom is served to the best effect by all things, as the space of fantasy here [serves] the past. This is how deeply [the] theological has sunk into the realm of pulp fiction.’ (VI, 565-566; see also VI, 581 and notes G°, 5 (V, 1009) and c°, 3 of the *Passagen-Werk*, the latter of which opens with the highly significant line: ‘Zweideutigkeit der Passagen als eine Zweideutigkeit des *Raumes*.’

fundamental tendency of midrash [is] the urge to unite the diverse parts of Scripture into a single and seamless whole reflecting the unity of God's will. This tendency derives directly from the rabbinic ideology of the canonical Torah – Pentateuch, Prophets and Writings – as the inspired word of God, a timeless unity in which *each and every verse is simultaneous with every other, temporally and semantically*; as a result, every verse, no matter how remote, can be seen as a possible source for illuminating the meaning of any other verse.<sup>137</sup> Benjamin's fusion of this high theological motif with the extreme banality of *Kolportage* – 'So tief ist Theologisches hier in den Bereich der Kolportage gesunken' – is the quintessence, *der Inbegriff*, of profane illumination. The *Kolportagephänomen* defies the limitations of both time and space, transporting the canonical highpoints of history into the present-day banality of a bourgeois sitting room, familiarising the former and defamiliarising the latter. It is probably the escapist or even utopian function of the *Trivallliteratur* peddled from door to door in which Benjamin saw the greatest potential, as it contains a transformation of the desire for a better world, whether this should be in the past or in the future, to which the *Passagen-Werk* sought to appeal. Much like the Jewish tradition, this phenomenon does not so much refuse to acknowledge the linearity of history, as refuse to accept the unidirectionality of this linearity. In the space of the Talmud, as we have seen, prophets as well as ordinary rabbis can move back and forth in history, intervening in discussions, supporting a ruling, serving as

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(V, 1050). Again, the usual limitations forbid us from taking this crucial theme as far as we would like to. To be continued.)

an intermediary between the divine and the human, or even providing light relief. Most importantly, however, when a past occurrence is inserted in such a way in a present-day discussion, it honours and redeems the decision of the majority as well as the opinion of the individual. A prime example of this is the passage from *Baba Mezhiah*, which we quoted in the first chapter and mentioned again in this chapter to illustrate the concept of the Talmudic joke. Disputing whether a particular oven should be considered clean or unclean, Rabbi Eliezer finds himself in a minority position against all the other sages. In his exasperation, he calls for a number of miracles to occur to prove him right:

Again he urged: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a *halachic* dispute, what have ye to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honour of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honour of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. (B. *Baba Mezhiah*, 59b).

The seemingly precarious state of suspension of the walls, which has nevertheless lasted until this day, according to the Talmud, may serve as an allegory of the particular form of the suspension of judgement in the Jewish tradition, where the observance of the *Halakhah* is accompanied by the remembrance of the fruits of *Talmud Torah* (and of course the remembrance of past injustice, as in the *Pesach Haggadah*). It is this twin perspective, which

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<sup>137</sup> David Stern, 'Midrash and the Language of Exegesis', p. 108 (our emphasis). See

acknowledges that history may be a *fait accompli* to a certain extent, but refuses accept that it cannot be counterbalanced in the act of remembrance, which lies at the very basis of Benjamin's elusive *Kolportagephänomen*, and indeed the project of the *Passagen-Werk*. Benjamin referred to this phenomenon as the *Unabgeschlossenheit der Geschichte*, the refusal to approach history with the maxim 'look, but don't touch!'<sup>138</sup> The concept of remembrance *does* touch historical events, lifting them out of the continuity of history and holding them up as a mirror to the present and future. This is the theological element which Benjamin imported into his philosophy of history, convinced that history could not be understood properly in any other sense. It is also one of the main points on which some of the more materialist members of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* begged to differ. In a letter dated 16 March 1937, Max Horkheimer wrote an elaborate commentary on Benjamin's major essay on the collector, *Eduard Fuchs: Sammler und Historiker*, in which Benjamin had written about the task of historical materialism: 'Das Werk der Vergangenheit ist ihm nicht abgeschlossen.'<sup>139</sup> Horkheimer confessed that he could not see how such a concept was viable: 'Das vergangene Unrecht ist geschehen und abgeschlossen. Die Erschlagenen sind wirklich erschlagen. Letzten Endes ist Ihre Aussage theologisch. Nimmt man die

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chapter one.

<sup>138</sup> Benjamin situates the optical on the side of the dream and the haptic or tactile firmly on the side of awakening, this is why he saw a revolutionary potential in the figure of the collector, for whom the touch of an object is of the utmost importance: 'Besitz und Haben sind dem Taktischen zugeordnet und stehen in einem gewissen Gegensatz zum Optischen. Sammler sind Menschen mit taktischem Instinkt. Übrigens hat neuerdings mit der Abkehr vom Naturalismus der Primat des Optischen aufgehört, der das vorige Jahrhundert beherrscht.' [H 2, 5] (V, 274).

Unabgeschlossenheit ganz ernst, so muß man an das jüngste Gericht glauben.'<sup>140</sup> Benjamin responded to this letter twice. He sent one answer to Horkheimer himself, in which he explains in conspicuously secularised terms what the ramifications of the *Unabgeschlossenheit der Geschichte* might be. Benjamin's response is again quite characteristically, if covertly, Jewish. Admitting that there is a certain finality to defeat, he maintains that it is after all not the dead who should remember, but that it is the responsibility of the survivors to honour their obligation towards the past by remembering that they have a place in history only because others have not. The vanquished, Benjamin maintains, may have lost the war, but they did not lose their history:

Sehr bedeutsam ist für mich Ihr Exkurs über das abgeschlossene oder aber offene Werk der Vergangenheit. Ich glaube ihn durchaus zu verstehen, und irre ich mich nicht, so kommuniziert Ihr Gedanke mit einer Überlegung, die mich öfter beschäftigt hat. Mir ist immer die Frage wichtig gewesen, wie die merkwürdige Sprachfigur zu verstehen sei: einen Krieg, einen Prozeß *verlieren*. Der Krieg, der Prozeß sind ja doch nicht der Einsatz sondern der Akt der Entscheidung über denselben. Ich habe mir das zuletzt so zurechtgelegt: wer den Krieg, den Prozeß verliert, für den ist das in dieser Auseinandersetzung umfaßte Geschehen wirklich abgeschlossen und somit *seiner Praxis* verloren; für den Partner, der

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<sup>139</sup> 'The work of the past is not closed off [or finished] for [historical materialism].'  
(II, 477).

<sup>140</sup> 'Past injustice has happened and is closed off. The defeated have really been defeated. In the final analysis, your statement is theological. If one takes the

gewonnen hat, ist das nicht der Fall. Der Sieg trägt seine Früchte ganz anders als die Niederlage die Folgen einheimst.<sup>141</sup>

A second response, however, Benjamin reserved for his most esoteric collection of notes, the theoretical foundation of the *Passagen-Werk* now known as *Konvolut N: Erkenntnis-kritisches, Theorie des Fortschritts*. In this note, which also answers Horkheimer's question, Benjamin does not seek to conceal the fact that his work is theologically inspired. On the contrary, this is one of those extremely rare moments when Benjamin makes the extent of this theological inspiration very, and very bluntly explicit. But, perhaps even more crucially, Benjamin counters Horkheimer's reservations, not with a (superficially) secularised version of his *Geschichtsphilosophie*, but with a reflection on the strategic concealment of theology, the necessity of which he considers to be a fact as much the necessity of theology as such to understand history:

Das Korrektiv dieser [i.e. Horkheimer's] Gedankengänge liegt in der Überlegung, daß die Geschichte nicht allein eine Wissenschaft sondern

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incompleteness of history entirely seriously, one must believe in the last judgement.' (GB V, 495; quoted partly in V, 589).

<sup>141</sup> 'Very important for me is your *excursus* about the completed [*abgeschlossen*] or open work of the past. I think I understand it completely, and if I am not mistaken, your thought corresponds to a consideration which has often preoccupied me. The question how to understand the remarkable figure of speech, to *lose* a war, a trial, has always been important to me. The war, the trial are not the stake but the act of deciding about it. Ultimately, I have explained it to myself as follows: to whoever loses the war or the trial, the events encompassed in this confrontation are really over, and thus lost to *his praxis*; for the partner who has won, this is not the case. Victory

nicht minder eine Form des Eingedenkens ist. Was die Wissenschaft 'festgestellt' hat, kann das Eingedenken modifizieren. Das Eingedenken kann das Unabgeschlossene (das Glück) zu einem Abgeschlossenen und das Abgeschlossene (das Leid) zu einem Unabgeschlossenen machen. Das ist Theologie; aber im Eingedenken machen wir eine Erfahrung, die uns verbietet, die Geschichte grundsätzlich atheologisch zu begreifen, so wenig wir sie in unmittelbar theologischen Begriffen zu schreiben versuchen dürfen.<sup>142</sup>

This strategic consideration came to dominate Benjamin's thought during his last few years, as work on the *Passagen-Werk* slowed down to a crawl, his handwriting became increasingly miniaturised and his health gradually deteriorated. The crucial question no longer seemed to be *what* the message of the *Pariser Passagen* could be, but *how* his projected magnum opus was to proceed. As Benjamin eventually ran out of time, with the work not even approaching completion, he turned his attention towards another project, the manuscript of which he valued more than his own life.<sup>143</sup> This was the text now

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bears its fruits completely differently from the way defeat takes the consequences.' (GB V, 486-487).

<sup>142</sup> 'The corrective of this train of thought lies in the notion that history is not only a science but also and no less a form of remembrance. What science has 'determined', remembrance can modify. Remembrance can turn the unfinished (happiness) into something completed [*abgeschlossen*] and the completed (suffering) into something unfinished. That is theology; but in remembering we have an experience which forbids us to understand history in a fundamentally a-theological way, however little we are allowed to attempt to write it in immediately theological concepts.' [N 8, 1] (V, 589).

<sup>143</sup> As he was crossing the Pyrenées, trying to reach Spain, Benjamin was carrying a large black briefcase, in all probability containing *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, about which he said to his guide, Lisa Fittko: 'You must understand that this briefcase is the most important thing to me, [...] I cannot risk losing it. It is the manuscript that

known as *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, which incorporated some material from the *Passagen-Werk*, as well as several ideas from his essays on Kafka, Baudelaire and Eduard Fuchs. The text contains eighteen theses and two addenda, apodictic and parabolic statements circling around the concepts of history and historiography. They were no doubt intended both as an extremely condensed summary of the *Passagen-Werk*, which he already considered to be lost, and as a key to the aborted project, if ever it should be found again (which it was after the war, thanks to the efforts of Georges Bataille, then librarian of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris). The opening paragraph of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* is, in its turn, the key to the elusive *Thesen* as well as the allegorical *Verschränkung* of Benjamin's method. This thesis, here in the first version, is Benjamin's final answer to the objection put forward by Horkheimer three years earlier:

Es lief bekanntlich eine zeitlang die Legende von einem Automaten um, der so wunderbar konstruiert sei, daß er auf jeden Zug eines Schachspielers von selbst mit dem richtigen Gegenzuge erwidere. Eine Puppe in türkischem Gewand, eine Wasserpfeife im Munde saß vor dem Brett, das auf einem Tisch ruhte. Ein System von Spiegeln erweckte die Illusion, man könne durch diesen Tisch hindurchsehen. In Wahrheit saß ein buckliger Zwerg darinne[n], der ein Meister im Schachspiel war und die Hand der Puppe an Schnüren lenkte, wenn er den Gegenzug einmal gefunden hatte. Jeder der mit der Puppe sich messen wollte, konnte den

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*must* be saved. It is more important than I am.' (Lisa Fittko, 'The Story of Old



leeren Sitz einnehmen, der ihr gegenüber errichtet war. Ich könnte mir ein pendant zu dieser Apparatur in der Philosophie umso leichter vorstellen, als der Streit um den wahren Begriff der Geschichte wohl in Gestalt einer Partie zwischen zwei Partnern sich denken läßt. Gewinnen soll, wenn es nach mir geht die Türkenpuppe, die bei den Philosophen Materialismus heißt. Sie kann es ohne weiteres mit jedem Gegner aufnehmen, wenn die Dienste der Theologie ihr gesichert sind, die heute ohnehin klein und häßlich ist und sich nirgends sehen lassen darf.<sup>144</sup>

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Benjamin', quoted in 'Anmerkungen der Herausgeber', V, 1187).

<sup>144</sup> 'It is well known that for a while there circulated the legend of an automaton, which was constructed in such a way that it automatically reciprocated every move of a chess-player with the right countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire, a hookah in its mouth, sat behind the board, which rested on a table. A system of mirrors gave the illusion that one could see through the table. In reality, concealed within sat a hump-backed dwarf, who was a master of chess and guided the hand of the puppet by strings once he had found the right countermove. Anybody who wanted to compete with the puppet, could take the empty seat which was put opposite the puppet. I could imagine a counterpart of this apparatus in philosophy, all the more easily because the dispute surrounding the true concept of history can be construed in the form of a game between two partners. The winner should be, if I have a say in it, the Turkish puppet, whom the philosophers call materialism. It can easily take on any opponent, so long as it is assured of the services of theology, which nowadays is small and ugly and is not allowed to show itself anywhere.' (I, 1247). The version which eventually made it into *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, a text with an extremely complex redaction, has been condensed into a more concentrated image, yet it still contains the highly significant *Lehrsatz*, hidden in a grammatical ambiguity, stating that the dwarf of theology sits 'in Wahrheit': 'Bekanntlich soll es einen Automaten gegeben haben, der so konstruiert gewesen sei, daß er jeden Zug eines Schachspielers mit einem Gegenzuge erwidert habe, der ihm den Gewinn der Partie sicherte. Eine Puppe in türkischer Tracht, eine Wasserpfeife im Munde, saß vor dem Brett, das auf einem geräumigen Tisch aufruhte. Durch ein System von Spiegeln wurde die Illusion erweckt, dieser Tisch sei von allen Seiten durchsichtig. In Wahrheit saß ein buckliger Zwerg darin, der ein Meister im Schachspiel war und die Hand der Puppe an Schnüren lenkte. Zu dieser Apparatur kann man sich ein Gegenstück in der Philosophie vorstellen. Gewinnen soll immer die Puppe, die man "historischen Materialismus" nennt. Sie kann es ohne weiteres mit jedem aufnehmen, wenn sie die Theologie in

This opening image of Benjamin's last writings is the opening to his entire work. It is his own condensed, miniature, monadological guide for the perplexed to his own work, a paradoxically oblique direct statement of the impossibility of the direct statement. It was as close as Benjamin came to the revelation of his *Lehre*, reluctantly and persistently suggestive to the last, as indicated by his further condensation of the first thesis. It was also as far as Benjamin went. *Il ne lui restait pas assez de temps pour écrire tout ce qu'il eusse voulu écrire.*

*Niskor Benjamin.*

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ihrem Dienst nimmt, die heute bekanntlich klein und häßlich ist und sich ohnehin nicht darf blicken lassen.' (I, 693).

There is an overarching logic in Benjamin's intuitions regarding the concepts of tradition, knowledge and truth, or at least a certain continuity which cannot be overlooked, and which suggests that he is indeed trying to construct the 'reines systematisches Erfahrungskontinuum'<sup>1</sup> which he feels to be the greatest potential or the greatest promise of the Kantian system. And, in fact, if we consider the characteristics which all these concepts share, this 'Αρχή reveals itself as a parallel to the most strictly theological concept of all, and at the same time the most unnameable, which has sometimes been called God.

The often hesitant style of Benjamin's writings, and his sometimes infuriating delaying strategies, of which this very thesis has not been entirely innocent, can be explained by the nature of the subject matter he is trying to address. It is quite conspicuous that Benjamin never really defines the concepts he is working with in the traditional sense of the word *definition*. As the final quotation of our third chapter suggests, the *Feststellung* of a scientific mode of thinking is not entirely appropriate here. This is because the name of God and the true revelation which derives from it, even if they are merely used as a conceptual framework regardless of their confessional religious meaning, cannot be caught within the limits of a definition: they would be demoted to the status of a concept themselves, and it would no longer be possible to orientate

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<sup>1</sup> 'a pure and systematic continuum of experience' (II, 164).

ideas around and towards them.<sup>2</sup> If we may be allowed to paraphrase Benjamin's own remark on the absence of the name of God from Kafka's work: 'Wer nicht versteht, was [...] den Gebrauch dieses Namens verbietet, versteht [da]von keine Zeile.' He often describes, or rather circumscribes, the concepts of tradition or *Lehre*, God, truth and language, but he never delimits them; more crucially still, he never sets them off against one another. The reason for this, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, is that he sees these concepts in theological terms. As he states quite explicitly in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Benjamin is convinced that it is impossible even to think the concept of truth without a 'wenn auch latenten Hinweis auf die Gegenstände der Theologie'.<sup>3</sup> This 'although latent reference' to theology will have its implications for the structure of Benjamin's thought, literally informing its most basic and fundamental tenets, yet remaining mysteriously concealed in its most profound depths. He described this double necessity, both of the presence of theology and of its concealment, in another famous passage

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<sup>2</sup> In 1918, the very year *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* was written, Scholem wrote a note in his diary much to the same effect: 'Die Lehre (תורה) kann nicht definiert, sie kann nur gelehrt werden. Die Lehre anders als in ihr selber definieren (was ja als Limes der Definition eben selbst keine mehr ist), heißt den entscheidendsten Irrtum im Bereich des Judentums begehen.' (*Tagebücher*, vol. 2, p. 343).

<sup>3</sup> 'Diese Übung hat sich allen Epochen, denen die unumschreibliche Wesenheit des Wahren vor Augen stand, in einer Propädeutik aufgenötigt, die man mit dem scholastischen Terminus des Traktats darum ansprechen darf, weil er jenen wenn auch latenten Hinweis auf die Gegenstände der Theologie enthält, ohne welche der Wahrheit nicht gedacht werden kann.' (I, 208). Benjamin uses the term *Propädeutik* to refer to the exercise of the form, which is the *Traktat*, meant to prepare philosophy to become a 'Darstellung der Wahrheit', speaking with the 'didaktische Autorität der Lehre' (I, 207-208). It is quite interesting that he later chooses to use the same term, in its German version *Vorschule*, to describe the relationship of intoxication to *profane Erleuchtung*, and it may serve as yet a further indication of the structural and conceptual parallels which continue to inform Benjamin's work.

from the *Passagen-Werk*: 'Mein Denken verhält sich zur Theologie wie das Löschblatt zur Tinte. Es ist ganz von ihr vollgesogen. Ginge es aber nach dem Löschblatt, so würde nichts was geschrieben ist, übrig bleiben.'<sup>4</sup>

In *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, his intention is to create a concept of perception or knowledge – *Erkenntnis* – which will make it possible to think the concept of God: 'Damit soll durchaus nicht gesagt sein daß die Erkenntnis Gott, wohl aber durchaus daß sie die Erfahrung und Lehre von ihm allererst ermöglicht.'<sup>5</sup> Theology, *stricto sensu*, is exactly that: the doctrine of God.<sup>6</sup> But this logos, this *Lehre*, does not ask the question *whether* God exists – that is the domain of religion – but, if at all, *how* God exists, what his attributes are, how we could know or experience God. In other words, theology is the phenomenology and epistemology of the divine, however one would wish to define this divinity.<sup>7</sup> In *Über Sprache*, Benjamin used the Bible

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<sup>4</sup> 'My thought is related to theology like the blotter to the ink. It is completely saturated with it. However, if it depended on the blotter, nothing of what was written would remain.' [V, 588] (N 7a, 7). This is essentially the same concept as he described in the allegorical image of the dwarf in the chess-machine from *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, which we quoted at the end of the previous chapter.

<sup>5</sup> 'This is not at all to say that this knowledge makes God possible, but that it makes the experience and doctrine of him possible.' (II, 164).

<sup>6</sup> The implication that the *kommende Philosophie* could thus well be, quite simply, theology, is anticipated by Benjamin himself at the end of his essay: 'Eine solche Philosophie wäre entweder in ihrem allgemeinen Teile selbst als Theologie zu bezeichnen oder wäre dieser sofern sie etwa historisch philosophische Elemente einschließt übergeordnet.' (II, 168).

<sup>7</sup> In the *Nachtrag* to *Über das Programm*, Benjamin insists on the same distinction between theology and religion: 'Zunächst ist es klar daß es sich im Grunde nicht um die Frage nach dem Verhältnis zwischen Philosophie und Religion, sondern nach dem zwischen Philosophie und Lehre von der Religion handeln muß; mit andren Worten um die Frage nach dem Verhältnis der Erkenntnis überhaupt zur Erkenntnis von der Religion.' (II, 169-170). In a short text from around 1917, given the tentative title *Über die Ordnung der Dinge*, Scholem, perhaps quite surprisingly, says he feels it is 'augenblicklich ganz gleichgültig, ob das Zentrum der Dinge nun "existiert" oder

in order to explore the essence of language, not because he took the book as gospel truth, but because it presented itself as revelation, and thus necessarily conceived of language as ‘eine letzte, nur in ihrer Entfaltung zu betrachtende, unerklärliche und mystische Wirklichkeit’.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, *Über das Programm* is not interested in the question of the existence of God, but in the possibility of thinking the concept of God, and how the possibility of this concept would affect thought as such. To Walter Benjamin, as we have seen, God is indeed a conceptual possibility. In fact, he uses the concept of the divine as a decisive factor in his language theory, and he uses the concept of God – but therefore not God himself – as the keystone to his thought on truth and tradition.

Benjamin never provides us with a direct definition of God, because, as we indicated before, that is both impossible and heretical (or heretical and therefore impossible). The only thing that can be predicated of God within the Jewish tradition is existence, which, even in grammatical terms, would not even be a predicate. *God is* is the naked, tautological statement of God’s being, his identity with himself, his unity.<sup>9</sup> The clearest expression of the tautology is

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“nicht existiert”. (Dies ist die mir also höchst uninteressante Fragestellung der Atheisten).’ (*Tagebücher*, vol. 2, p. 107).

<sup>8</sup> ‘an ultimate, inexplicable and mystical reality which should only be seen in its unfolding’ (II, 147).

<sup>9</sup> This identity and unity is stressed in the Shema: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One.’ (*Dr*: 6, 4). In the Hebrew original, ‘יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד’, the absence of the copula in the so-called construct state – the juxtaposition of two nouns to designate identity – puts an even greater emphasis on the tautological nature of the statement. As we mentioned before, these ideas were developed philosophically mainly during Talmudic and particularly post-talmudic times, for instance by Saadyah Gaon and Maimonides, who reacted strongly against any attempt to anthropomorphise God, as this detracted from his divinity. We find a similar warning in the second volume of *Philosophie der Geschichte*, which sounds as if it might well have been influenced by Maimonides: ‘Bei dieser Betrachtung der Gottheit als Schöpfer und Erhalter des creatürlichen Daseyns, wornach dieselbe als das ewige Princip und der

the name, the sign which can refer to one thing only, and thus ceases to be a sign.<sup>10</sup> In the case of God, this tautology – the logos referring to the same entity – is expressed *à coup redoublé* in the ineffable tetragrammaton YHWH. The vocalisation of this name of God is unknown, and in readings it is substituted by *Adonai*, meaning ‘the Lord’ (which is the basis of the misnomer *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*). But more importantly, the tetragrammaton is explained in Exodus 3:14 with the phrase *אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה*, *I am who is* or *I am that I am*. The exceptional nature of this phrase lies in the fact that it is the smallest possible self-contained logical system, missing out one step of the Cartesian *cogito* and the Kantian *Ich denke* (namely the disjunction between subject and object). *I am that I am*, the statement of existential identity, is the juxtaposition of extremes that constitutes the two-step dialectic which Benjamin termed *Dialektik im Stillstand*. There is no object in *I am that I am*, and consequently the role of the subject itself changes. The subject does not find itself opposed to an object which it is trying to master or reduce to a relationship in which the object, passively, lies before the subject. Nor does the subject become aware of itself as a thinking subject, thus creating a rift within itself which, to a certain extent, compromises the integrity of the subject (but nevertheless remains paradoxically necessary for the subject to come into being in the first place).

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lebendige Urtypus des endlich Geschaffenen erscheint, dürfen wir jedoch nicht stehen bleiben; sondern müssen, um uns zu der Idee der unendlichen alle creatürliche Fassung übersteigenden Erhabenheit Gottes anbetend zu erheben, und unser eignes Seyn in seiner ganzer Negativität zu erkennen, von allem Geschaffenem abstrahiren, und so weit es unserer endlichen beschränkten Vernunft möglich ist, die Gottheit außer allen Relationen, in ihrem reinen, ewigen, absoluten An- und Fürsichseyn uns denken.’ (M II, 56).

<sup>10</sup> On this distinction between signs and names, see Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Événement Contexte’, in *Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 365–393.

This question is structurally identical to the necessary disjunction between the sign and the signifier, without which there can be no sign. It is this very same disjunction which is overcome, or anticipated – depending on one's point of view, in the concept of the Λόγος, the word made flesh. Even more so, *I am that I am*, or YHWH, is not only a name which can refer only to one entity, it is also the one name which refers only to its own existence, to itself. The subject of *I am that I am* is like the self-contained, non-predatory subject of the experience of existence within tradition, as Benjamin described it before, with the one difference that *I am that I am* is the alpha and omega of tradition itself. And in *Über das Programm*, it is this specifically theological concept of identity which Benjamin tries to name as the ground of the new *Sphäre der Erkenntnis* which he himself had defined as the *Lehre*:

Die Fixierung des bei Kant unbekannten Begriffes der Identität hat voraussichtlich in der transzendentalen Logik eine große Rolle zu spielen, insofern er in der Kategorientafel nicht steht, dennoch vermutlich den obersten Begriff der transzendentallogischen ausmacht und vielleicht wahrhaft geeignet ist die Sphäre der Erkenntnis jenseits der Subjekt-Objekt-Terminologie autonom zu begründen.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 'The establishment of the concept of identity, which is unknown to Kant, probably needs to play a large part in transcendental logic, insofar as it does not figure in the table of categories yet probably constitutes the highest concept of the transcendental-logical category and is perhaps truly capable of autonomously grounding the sphere of knowledge beyond the subject-object terminology.' (II, 167).



This is where we come to the crux of the essay. Benjamin has named the possible ground for the new 'Sphäre der Erkenntnis', which a coming philosophy must be able to think, as the concept of identity. From a Jewish perspective, it would be possible to conclude that this 'oberste Begriff', this highest concept of transcendental logic would therefore coincide with God, as he is the very concept of identity. This however, would be a religious statement, for a theological conclusion could never hope to be so direct, so blunt in fact, as to point straight towards the divinity. *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* is no different. The idea of God is suggested, but never indicated. On the same page as the passage quoted above, Benjamin writes: 'Die Konvergenz der Ideen auf den obersten Begriff der Erkenntnis ist nachzuweisen.'<sup>12</sup> This tells us that the 'oberste Begriff' is to be found at the centre of the realm of ideas, that it is, in other words, both the ground of the new sphere of knowledge as well as the destination of its ideas. In a letter to Scholem dated 31 January 1918 – in an esoteric document, in the most original sense of the word – Benjamin states quite explicitly what he understands both this 'oberste Begriff' and the 'höchste Sphäre' to be:

[...] metaphysisch ist diejenige Erkenntnis die a priori die Wissenschaft als eine Sphäre in dem absoluten göttlichen Ordnungszusammenhang, dessen höchste Sphäre die Lehre und dessen Inbegriff und Urgrund Gott

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<sup>12</sup> 'The convergence of the ideas on the highest concept of knowledge is to be proven.' (II, 167).

ist zu erkennen trachtet, und die auch die 'Autonomie' der Wissenschaft als sinnvoll und möglich nur in diesem Zusammenhang betrachtet.<sup>13</sup>

God is both 'Inbegriff' and 'Urgrund' of the sphere of knowledge, a sphere which is defined in terms of an 'absoluten göttlichen Ordnungszusammenhang'. All these terms are in need of some clarification, as a simple translation cannot hope to do them justice. The 'Ordnungszusammenhang', firstly, could be translated, rather clumsily, as 'coherence' or 'context of order', although it may be better to use the more general term 'order', as this has the benefit of a certain vagueness which is also present in the original. At face value, it is not entirely clear what this 'absolute divine order', which is meant to encompass the sphere of knowledge, might be, but it would become more obvious if we recall Scholem's definition of the Jewish tradition as the study of 'den transkausalen Zusammenhang der Dinge und ihr Verfaßtsein in Gott'.<sup>14</sup>

The study of the Jewish tradition is not the study of a thing or an object, but of a sphere, a coherence, *ein Zusammenhang*; and the student of the Jewish tradition is a part of that coherence, he is immersed in it to such an extent that he ceases to be a subject, strictly speaking. Benjamin says that the 'autonomy' of science or knowledge – the term *Wissenschaft* is extremely ambiguous – can only be thought in such a coherence which takes the shape of the sphere of

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<sup>13</sup> '[...] metaphysical is the knowledge which attempts to conceive of science [*Wissenschaft*] as a sphere in the absolute divine order, the highest sphere of which is the *Lehre* and the personification [*Inbegriff*] and first ground of which is God, and which also sees the 'autonomy' of science as meaningful and possible only in this [divine] order.' (GB I, 422).

<sup>14</sup> Scholem, *Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 73 (see chapter three, note 93).

tradition or the *Lehre*. This is because the sphere of tradition is autonomous in the deepest sense of the word: it provides its own law, it *is* the law from the first to the last letter. All is the word, all is Torah. And, finally returning to what we called the simplest, most intricate paradox of human thought, the law is God because the word is God. God is the *Urgrund*, the first cause or the ground of this law, but he is also its *Inbegriff*, its epitome or its inclusion. The word *Inbegriff*, which Benjamin uses several times to designate the status of God within the *Lehre*, is oddly ambiguous. It would normally be translated, admittedly slightly metaphorically, as the epitome or the quintessence, but it literally means the *Gesamtheit*, the all, or the sum of all concepts, *Begriffe*, encompassed by a single one. This might become slightly clearer when we recall the enigmatic circumscription of God in *Über Sprache*, via the 'Bezirk der Ideen, deren Umkreis diejenige Gottes bezeichnet'.<sup>15</sup> This means that the ideas both converge on the 'oberste Begriff' and are circled, circumscribed by it. This is what it means for God to be both the *Urgrund* and the *Inbegriff*. God is both the *Inbegriff* of and the *Begriff* in the heart of tradition, the alfa and omega.<sup>16</sup> With this foundation, the whole of tradition becomes divine. As we discussed in the first chapter, God, Torah and tradition thus become interchangeable and indistinguishable, and the appropriate way to approach God thus becomes the appropriate way to approach tradition, and *vice versa*. As Benjamin writes in *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*:

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<sup>15</sup> II, 141 (see chapter three, note 40).

<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, Benjamin does remain faithful to the heterodoxy we have described above, which conceives of God as a linguistic entity, when he quotes Hamann in *Über Sprache*: "*Sprache, die Mutter der Vernunft und Offenbarung, ihr A und Ω*". (II, 147).

Die Philosophie beruht darauf daß in der Struktur der Erkenntnis die der Erfahrung liegt und aus ihr zu entfalten ist. Diese Erfahrung umfaßt denn auch die Religion, nämlich als die wahre, wobei weder Gott noch Mensch Objekt oder Subjekt der Erfahrung ist, wohl aber diese Erfahrung auf der reinen Erkenntnis beruht als deren Inbegriff allein die Philosophie Gott denken kann und muß. Es ist die Aufgabe der kommenden Erkenntnistheorie für die Erkenntnis die Sphäre totaler Neutralität in Bezug auf die Begriffe Objekt und Subjekt zu finden; mit andern Worten die autonome ureigene Sphäre der Erkenntnis auszumitteln in der dieser Begriff auf keine Weise mehr die Beziehung zwischen zwei metaphysischen Entitäten bezeichnet.<sup>17</sup>

In June 1918, a few months after Benjamin wrote *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie*, Scholem planned to write '95 Thesen über Judentum und Zionismus', in imitation of Luther's 95 Wittenberg theses, as a present for

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<sup>17</sup> 'Philosophy is based on the fact that the structure of experience is contained within the structure of knowledge, and should be developed from it. This experience, therefore, also encompasses religion, namely as the true experience, whereby neither God nor man is object or subject of experience, but whereby this experience is based on pure knowledge, and philosophy alone can and must think of the epitome of this [knowledge] as God [or: philosophy can and must think of the epitome of this knowledge as God alone]. It is the task of the coming theory of knowledge to find the sphere of complete neutrality for knowledge with regard to the concepts of object and subject; in other words to discover the autonomous and very own sphere of knowledge in which this concept no longer designates, in any way, the relationship between two metaphysical entities.' (II, 163). Note that Benjamin uses the same construction to define God as he does in *Über Sprache*, where God is not addressed directly, but described through his penumbra: '[...] im Bezirk der Ideen, deren Umkreis diejenige Gottes bezeichnet, [...]' (II, 141). It is tempting to interpret this cautious circumnavigation as a strategy dictated by the theological nature of the concept, as we have explained above.

Benjamin's twenty-fifth birthday. These theses, which read much like a condensation of Benjamin's and Scholem's discussions and correspondence over the years, were indeed written, dated 15 July 1918 with the admonition 'mit 15jähriger Diskussionsfrist', but never given to Benjamin. Nevertheless, they will no doubt provide a very fertile ground to continue the study of Benjamin's work in the light of the Jewish tradition, although we have now come to the point where this study must take the form of a *potentialis* rather than a *realis*. However, we would like to reveal one single thesis, number 28, as it may serve as the contraction of Benjamin's *Über das Programm*, and, in a way, as a summary of our own argument, with the merciful brevity of the doctrinal *Lehrsatz*: 'In der Lehre gibt es weder Objekt noch Subjekt. Sie ist Medium.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> 'In the *Lehre*, there is neither object nor subject. It is medium.' (Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2, p. 302). Thesis 27 is no less remarkable, as it basically repeats what Benjamin had written to Scholem in 1917: 'Die Lehre ist das Medium, in dem sich der Lernende in den Lehrer verwandelt. Die Gelehrten sind die Schüler der Weisen.' (p. 302; see chapter three, note 96).

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